The New York Edition of Henry James

HENRY JAMES

The Tragic Muse

VOLUME II

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When Henry James looked back at *The Tragic Muse,* first published in 1890 when he was 47, he compared its inner harmony to an unevaporated scent. He was not wrong, for this novel is one of his major achievements.

The "Tragic Muse" of the title is the startlingly objective Miss Miriam Rooth, a young girl with more ambition than talent who becomes a star of the London stage. But far more important, in James's eyes, than Miriam's success, is the story of the disappointments to which Nick Dormer and his cousin Peter Sherringham are condemned. Nick, a would-be portrait painter, and Peter, a diplomat, are the victims of a duel between talent and integrity, a duel which forms the real theme of the novel.

Miriam and Nick and Peter play the major parts, but the minor roles are filled by brilliant actors. There is old Mrs. Lendon, "a large, mild, healthy woman, with a heavy tread, who liked early breakfasts, uncomfortable chairs, and the advertisement-sheet of the 'Times'." There is Nick's mother, who reminds a helpful waiter in a Paris restaurant that "You will give us what I tell you." Finally, there is Gabriel Nash, who keeps tormenting Nick's conscience. "One has one's form . . . and a mighty good thing that one has," he tells Nick. "I'm not afraid of putting all life into mine." Gabriel might have been speaking for James himself.

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THE NOVELS AND TALES OF
HENRY JAMES

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VOLUME VIII

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THE TRAGIC MUSE

VOLUME II

BOOK FIFTH

THE TRAGIC MUSE

XXII

Mrs. Dallow came up to London soon after the meeting of Parliament; she made no secret of the fact that she was fond of "town" and that in present conditions it would of course not have become less attractive to her. But she prepared to retreat again for the Easter vacation, not to go back to Harsh, but to pay a couple of country visits. She did not, however, depart with the crowd — she never did anything with the crowd — but waited till the Monday after Parliament rose; facing with composure, in Great Stanhope Street, the horrors, as she had been taught to consider them, of a Sunday out of the session. She had done what she could to mitigate them by asking a handful of "stray men" to dine with her that evening. Several members of this disconsolate class sought comfort in Great Stanhope Street in the afternoon, and them for the most part she also invited to return at eight o'clock. There were accordingly almost too many people at dinner; there were even a couple of wives. Nick Dormer was then present, though he had not been in the afternoon. Each of the other persons had said on coming in "So you've not gone — I'm awfully glad." Mrs. Dallow had replied "No, I've not gone," but she had in no case added that she was glad, nor had she

offered an explanation. She never offered explanations; she always assumed that no one could invent them so well as those who had the florid taste to desire them.

And in this case she was right, since it is probable that few of her visitors failed to say to themselves that her not having gone would have had something to do with Dormer. That could pass for an explanation with many of Mrs. Dallow's friends, who as a general thing were not morbidly analytic; especially with those who met Nick as a matter of course at dinner. His figuring at this lady's entertainments, being in her house whenever a candle was lighted, was taken as a sign that there was something rather particular between them. Nick had said to her more than once that people would wonder why they did n't marry; but he was wrong in this, inasmuch as there were many of their friends to whom it would n't have occurred that his position could be improved. That they were cousins was a fact not so evident to others as to themselves, in consequence of which they appeared remarkably intimate. The person seeing clearest in the matter was Mrs. Gresham, who lived so much in the world that being left now and then to one's own company had become her idea of true sociability. She knew very well that if she had been privately engaged to a young man as amiable as Nick Dormer she would have managed that publicity should n't play such a part in their intercourse; and she had her secret scorn for the stupidity of people whose conception of Nick's relation to Julia rested on the fact that he was always

included in her parties. "If he never was there they might talk," she said to herself. But Mrs. Gresham was supersubtle. To her it would have appeared natural that her friend should celebrate the parliamentary recess by going down to Harsh and securing the young man's presence there for a fortnight; she recognised Mrs. Dallow's actual plan as a comparatively poor substitute — the project of spending the holidays in other people's houses, to which Nick had also promised to come. Mrs. Gresham was romantic; she wondered what was the good of mere snippets and snatches, the chances that any one might have, when large still days *à deux* were open to you — chances of which half the sanctity was in what they excluded. However, there were more unsettled matters between Mrs. Dallow and her queer kinsman than even Mrs. Gresham's fine insight could embrace. She was not on the Sunday evening before Easter among the guests in Great Stanhope Street; but if she had been Julia's singular indifference to observation would have stopped short of encouraging her to remain in the drawing-room, along with Nick, after the others had gone. I may add that Mrs. Gresham's extreme curiosity would have emboldened her as little to do so. She would have taken for granted that the pair wished to be alone together, though she would have regarded this only as a snippet. The company had at all events stayed late, and it was nearly twelve o'clock when the last of them, standing before the fire in the room they had quitted, broke out to his companion:

"See here, Julia, how long do you really expect

me to endure this kind of thing?" Julia made him no answer; she only leaned back in her chair with her eyes upon his. He met her gaze a moment; then he turned round to the fire and for another moment looked into it. After this he faced his hostess again with the exclamation: "It's so foolish — it's so damnably foolish!"

She still said nothing, but at the end of a minute she spoke without answering him. "I shall expect you on Tuesday, and I hope you'll come by a decent train."

"What do you mean by a decent train?"

"I mean I hope you'll not leave it till the last thing before dinner, so that we can have a little walk or something."

"What's a little walk or something? Why, if you make such a point of my coming to Griffin, do you want me to come at all?"

She hesitated an instant; then she returned: "I knew you hated it!"

"You provoke me so," said Nick. "You try to, I think."

"And Severals is still worse. You'll get out of that if you can," Mrs. Dallow went on.

"If I can? What's to prevent me?"

"You promised Lady Whiteroy. But of course that's nothing."

"I don't care a straw for Lady Whiteroy."

"And you promised me. But that's less still."

"It *is* foolish — it's quite idiotic," said Nick with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ceiling.

There was another silence, at the end of which

Julia remarked: "You might have answered Mr. Macgeorge when he spoke to you."

"Mr. Macgeorge — what has he to do with it?"

"He has to do with your getting on a little. If you think that's the way —!"

Nick broke into a laugh. "I like lessons in getting on — in other words I suppose you mean in urbanity — from you, Julia!"

"Why not from me?"

"Because you can do nothing base. You're incapable of putting on a flattering manner to get something by it: therefore why should you expect me to? You're unflattering — that is, you're austere — in proportion as there may be something to be got."

She sprang from her chair, coming toward him. "There's only one thing I want in the world — you know very well."

"Yes, you want it so much that you won't even take it when it's pressed on you. How long do you seriously expect me to bear it?" Nick repeated.

"I never asked you to do anything base," she said as she stood in front of him. "If I'm not clever about throwing myself into things it's all the more reason you should be."

"If you're not clever, my dear Julia —?" Nick, close to her, placed his hands on her shoulders and shook her with a mixture of tenderness and passion. "You're clever enough to make me furious, sometimes!"

She opened and closed her fan looking down at it while she submitted to his mild violence. "All I want is that when a man like Mr. Macgeorge talks

to you you should n't appear bored to death. You used to be so charming under those inflictions. Now you appear to take no interest in anything. At dinner to-night you scarcely opened your lips; you treated them all as if you only wished they 'd go."

"I did wish they 'd go. Have n't I told you a hundred times what I think of your salon?"

"How then do you want me to live?" she asked. "Am I not to have a creature in the house?"

"As many creatures as you like. Your freedom 's complete and, as far as I 'm concerned, always will be. Only when you challenge me and overhaul me — not justly I think — I must confess the simple truth, that there are many of your friends I don't delight in."

"Oh *your* idea of pleasant people!" Julia lamented. "I should like once for all to know what it really is."

"I can tell you what it really is n't: it is n't Mr. Macgeorge. He's a being almost grotesquely limited."

"He 'll be where you 'll never be — unless you change."

"To be where Mr. Macgeorge is not would be very much my desire. Therefore why should I change?" Nick demanded. "However, I had n't the least intention of being rude to him, and I don't think I was," he went on. "To the best of my ability I assume a virtue if I have n't it; but apparently I 'm not enough of a comedian."

"If you have n't it?" she echoed. "It 's when you say things like that that you're so dreadfully tiresome. As if there were anything that you have n't or might n't have!"

Nick turned away from her; he took a few impa-

tient steps in the room, looking at the carpet, his hands always in his pockets. Then he came back to the fire with the observation: "It's rather hard to be found so wanting when one has tried to play one's part so beautifully." He paused with his eyes on her own and then went on with a vibration in his voice: "I've imperilled my immortal soul, or at least bemuddled my intelligence, by all the things I don't care for that I've tried to do, and all the things I detest that I've tried to be, and all the things I never can be that I've tried to look as if I were — all the appearances and imitations, the pretences and hypocrisies in which I've steeped myself to the eyes; and at the end of it (it serves me right!) my reward is simply to learn that I'm still not half humbug enough!"

Julia looked away from him as soon as he had spoken these words; she attached her eyes to the clock behind him and observed irrelevantly: "I'm very sorry, but I think you had better go. I don't like you to stay after midnight."

"Ah what you like and what you don't like, and where one begins and the other ends — all that's an impenetrable mystery!" the young man declared. But he took no further notice of her allusion to his departure, adding in a different tone: "'A man like Mr. Macgeorge'! When you say a thing of that sort in a certain particular way I should rather like to suffer you to perish."

Mrs. Dallow stared; it might have seemed for an instant that she was trying to look stupid. "How can I help it if a few years hence he's certain to be at the head of any Liberal Government?"

"We can't help it of course, but we can help talking about it," Nick smiled. "If we don't mention it it may n't be noticed."

"You're trying to make me angry. You're in one of your vicious moods," she returned, blowing out on the chimney-piece a guttering candle.

"That I'm exasperated I've already had the honour very positively to inform you. All the same I maintain that I was irreproachable at dinner. I don't want you to think I shall always be as good as that."

"You looked so out of it; you were as gloomy as if every earthly hope had left you, and you did n't make a single contribution to any discussion that took place. Don't you think I observe you?" she asked with an irony tempered by a tenderness unsuccessfully concealed.

"Ah my darling, what you observe—!" Nick cried with a certain bitterness of amusement. But he added the next moment more seriously, as if his tone had been disrespectful: "You probe me to the bottom, no doubt."

"You need n't come either to Griffin or to Severals if you don't want to."

"Give them up yourself; stay here with me!"

She coloured quickly as he said this, and broke out: "Lord, how you hate political houses!"

"How can you say that when from February to August I spend every blessed night in one?"

"Yes, and hate that worst of all."

"So do half the people who are in it. You, my dear, must have so many things, so many people, so much

mise-en-scène and such a perpetual spectacle to live," Nick went on. "Perpetual motion, perpetual visits, perpetual crowds! If you go into the country you'll see forty people every day and be mixed up with them all day. The idea of a quiet fortnight in town, when by a happy if idiotic superstition everybody goes out of it, disconcerts and frightens you. It's the very time, it's the very place, to do a little work and possess one's soul."

This vehement allocution found her evidently somewhat unprepared; but she was sagacious enough, instead of attempting for the moment a general rejoinder, to seize on a single phrase and say: "Work? What work can you do in London at such a moment as this?"

Nick considered. "I might tell you I want to get up a lot of subjects, to sit at home and read blue-books; but that would n't be quite what I mean."

"Do you mean you want to paint?"

"Yes, that's it, since you gouge it out of me."

"Why do you make such a mystery about it? You're at perfect liberty," Julia said.

She put out her hand to rest it on the mantel-shelf, but her companion took it on the way and held it in both his own. "You're delightful, Julia, when you speak in that tone — then I know why it is I love you. But I can't do anything if I go to Griffin, if I go to Severals."

"I see — I see," she answered thoughtfully and kindly.

"I've scarcely been inside of my studio for months, and I feel quite homesick for it. The idea of putting

in a few quiet days there has taken hold of me: I rather cling to it."

"It seems so odd your having a studio!" Julia dropped, speaking so quickly that the words were almost incomprehensible.

"Does n't it sound absurd, for all the good it does me, or I do *in* it? Of course one can produce nothing but rubbish on such terms — without continuity or persistence, with just a few days here and there. I ought to be ashamed of myself, no doubt; but even my rubbish interests me. 'Guenille si l'on veut, ma guenille m'est chère.' But I'll go down to Harsh with you in a moment, Julia," Nick pursued: "that would do as well if we could be quiet there, without people, without a creature; and I should really be perfectly content. You'd beautifully sit for me; it would be the occasion we've so often wanted and never found."

She shook her head slowly and with a smile that had a meaning for him. "Thank you, my dear; nothing would induce me to go to Harsh with you."

He looked at her hard. "What's the matter whenever it's a question of anything of that sort? Are you afraid of me?" She pulled her hand from him quickly, turning away; but he went on: "Stay with me here then, when everything's so right for it. We shall do beautifully — have the whole place, have the whole day, to ourselves. Hang your engagements! Telegraph you won't come. We'll live at the studio — you'll sit to me every day. Now or never's our chance — when shall we have so good a one? Think

how charming it will be! I'll make you wish awfully that I may do something."

"I can't get out of Griffin — it's impossible," Julia said, moving further away and with her back presented to him.

"Then you *are* afraid of me — simply!"

She turned straight round, very pale. "Of course I am. You're welcome to know it."

He went toward her, and for a moment she seemed to make another slight movement of retreat. This, however, was scarcely perceptible, and there was nothing to alarm in the tone of reasonable entreaty in which he spoke as he stood there. "Put an end, Julia, to our absurd situation — it really can't go on. You've no right to expect a man to be happy or comfortable in so false a position. We're spoken of odiously — of that we may be sure; and yet what good have we of it?"

"Spoken of? Do I care for that?"

"Do you mean you're indifferent because there are no grounds? That's just why I hate it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she returned with sharp disdain.

"Be my wife to-morrow — be my wife next week. Let us have done with this fantastic probation and be happy."

"Leave me now — come back to-morrow. I'll write to you." She had the air of pleading with him at present, pleading as he pleaded.

"You can't resign yourself to the idea of one's looking 'out of it'!" Nick laughed.

"Come to-morrow, before lunch," she went on.

"To be told I must wait six months more and then be sent about my business? Ah, Julia, Julia!" the young man groaned.

Something in this simple lament — it sounded natural and perfectly unstudied — seemed straightway to make a great impression on her. "You shall wait no longer," she said after a short silence.

"What do you mean by no longer?"

"Give me about five weeks — say till the Whitsuntide recess."

"Five weeks are a great deal," smiled Nick.

"There are things to be done — you ought to understand."

"I only understand how I love you."

She let herself go — "Dearest Nick!" — and he caught her and kept her in his arms.

"I've your promise then for five weeks hence to a day?" he demanded as she at last released herself.

"We'll settle that — the exact day; there are things to consider and to arrange. Come to luncheon to-morrow."

"I'll come early — I'll come at one," he said; and for a moment they stood all deeply and intimately taking each other in.

"Do you think I *want* to wait, any more than you?" she asked in congruity with this.

"I don't feel so much out of it now!" he declared by way of answer. "You'll stay of course now — you'll give up your visits?"

She had hold of the lappet of his coat; she had kept it in her hand even while she detached herself

from his embrace. There was a white flower in his buttonhole that she looked at and played with a moment before she said: "I've a better idea — you need n't come to Griffin. Stay in your studio — do as you like — paint dozens of pictures."

"Dozens? Barbarian!" Nick wailed.

The epithet apparently had an endearing suggestion for her; it at any rate led her to let him possess himself of her head and, so holding it, kiss her — led her to say: "What on earth do I want but that you should do absolutely as you please and be as happy as you can?"

He kissed her in another place at this; but he put it to her: "What dreadful proposition is coming now?"

"I'll go off and do up my visits and come back."

"And leave me alone?"

"Don't be affected! You know you'll work much better without me. You'll live in your studio — I shall be well out of the way."

"That's not what one wants of a sitter. How can I paint you?"

"You can paint me all the rest of your life. I shall be a perpetual sitter."

"I believe I could paint you without looking at you" — and his lighted face shone down on her. "You do excuse me then from those dreary places?"

"How can I insist after what you said about the pleasure of keeping these days?" she admirably — it was so all sincerely — asked.

"You're the best woman on earth — though it

does seem odd you should rush away as soon as our little business is settled."

"We shall make it up. I know what I'm about. And now go!" She ended by almost pushing him out of the room.

XXIII

It was certainly singular, in the light of other matters, that on sitting down in his studio after she had left town Nick should not, as regards the effort to project plastically some beautiful form, have felt more chilled by the absence of a friend who was such an embodiment of beauty. She was away and he missed her and longed for her, and yet without her the place was more filled with what he wanted to find in it. He turned into it with confused feelings, the strongest of which was a sense of release and recreation. It looked blighted and lonely and dusty, and his old studies, as he rummaged them out, struck him even as less inspired than the last time he had ventured to face them. But amid this neglected litter, in the colourless and obstructed light of a high north window which needed washing, he came nearer tasting the possibility of positive happiness: it appeared to him that, as he had said to Julia, he was more in possession of his soul. It was frivolity and folly, it was puerility, to spend valuable hours pottering over the vain implements of an art he had relinquished; and a certain shame that he had felt in presenting his plea to Julia that Sunday night arose from the sense not of what he clung to, but of what he had given up. He had turned his back on serious work, so that pottering was now all he could aspire to. It could n't be fruitful, it could n't be anything but

ridiculous, almost ignoble; but it soothed his nerves, it was in the nature of a secret dissipation. He had never suspected he should some day have nerves on his own part to count with; but this possibility had been revealed to him on the day it became clear that he was letting something precious go. He was glad he had not to justify himself to the critical, for this might have been a delicate business. The critical were mostly absent; and besides, shut up all day in his studio, how should he ever meet them? It was the place in the world where he felt furthest away from his constituents. That was a part of the pleasure — the consciousness that for the hour the coast was clear and his mind independent. His mother and his sister had gone to Broadwood: Lady Agnes — the phrase sounds brutal but represents his state of mind — was well out of the way. He had written to her as soon as Julia left town — he had apprised her of the fact that his wedding-day was fixed: a relief for poor Lady Agnes to a period of intolerable mystification, of dark dumb wondering and watching. She had said her say the day of the poll at Harsh; she was too proud to ask and too discreet to "nag"; so she could only wait for something that did n't come. The unconditioned loan of Broadwood had of course been something of a bribe to patience: she had at first felt that on the day she should take possession of that capital house Julia would indeed seem to have entered the family. But the gift had confirmed expectations just enough to make disappointment more bitter; and the discomfort was greater in proportion as she failed to discover what

was the matter. Her daughter Grace was much occupied with this question, and brought it up for discussion in a manner irritating to her ladyship, who had a high theory of being silent about it, but who, however, in the long run, was more unhappy when, in consequence of a reprimand, the girl suggested no reasons at all than when she suggested stupid ones. It eased Lady Agnes a little to advert to the mystery when she could have the air of not having begun.

The letter Nick received from her the first day of Passion Week in reply to his important communication was the only one he read at that moment; not counting of course the several notes Mrs. Dallow addressed to him from Griffin. There were letters piled up, as he knew, in Calcutta Gardens, which his servant had strict orders not to bring to the studio. Nick slept now in the bedroom attached to this retreat; got things, as he wanted them, from Calcutta Gardens; and dined at his club, where a stray surviving friend or two, seeing him prowl about the library in the evening, was free to impute to such eccentricity some subtly political basis. When he thought of his neglected letters he remembered Mr. Carteret's convictions on the subject of not "getting behind"; they made him laugh, in the slightly sonorous painting-room, as he bent over one of the old canvases that he had ventured to turn to the light. He was fully determined, however, to master his correspondence before going down, the last thing before Parliament should reassemble, to spend another day at Beauclere. Mastering his correspondence meant,

in Nick's mind, breaking open envelopes; writing answers was scarcely involved in the idea. But Mr. Carteret would never guess that. Nick was not moved even to write to him that the affair with Julia was on the point of taking the form he had been so good as to desire: he reserved the pleasure of this announcement for a personal interview.

The day before Good Friday, in the morning, his stillness was broken by a rat-tat-tat on the outer door of his studio, administered apparently by the knob of a walking-stick. His servant was out and he went to the door, wondering who his visitor could be at such a time, especially of the rather presuming class. The class was indicated by the visitor's failure to look for the bell — since there *was* a bell, though it required a little research. In a moment the mystery was solved: the gentleman who stood smiling at him from the threshold could only be Gabriel Nash. Nick had not seen this whimsical personage for several months, and had had no news of him beyond a general intimation that he was following his fancy in foreign parts. His old friend had sufficiently prepared him, at the time of their reunion in Paris, for the idea of the fitful in intercourse; and he had not been ignorant, on his return from Paris, that he should have had an opportunity to miss him if he had not been too busy to take advantage of it. In London, after the episode at Harsh, Gabriel had not reappeared: he had redeemed none of the pledges given the night they walked together to Notre Dame and conversed on important matters. He was to have interposed in Nick's destiny, but he had not interposed; he was

to have pulled him hard and in the opposite sense from Julia, but there had been no pulling; he was to have saved him, as he called it, and yet Nick was lost. This circumstance indeed formed his excuse: the member for Harsh had rushed so wantonly to perdition. Nick had for the hour seriously wished to keep hold of him: he valued him as a salutary influence. Yet on coming to his senses after his election our young man had recognised that Nash might very well have reflected on the thanklessness of such a slippery subject — might have held himself released from his vows. Of course it had been particularly in the event of a Liberal triumph that he had threatened to make himself felt; the effect of a brand plucked from the burning would be so much greater if the flames were already high. Yet Nick had not kept him to the letter of this pledge, and had so fully admitted the right of a thorough connoisseur, let alone a faithful friend, to lose patience with him that he was now far from greeting his visitor with a reproach. He felt much more thrown on his defence.

Gabriel, however, forbore at first to attack him. He brought in only blandness and benevolence and a great content at having obeyed the mystic voice — it was really a remarkable case of second sight — which had whispered him that the recreant comrade of his prime was in town. He had just come back from Sicily after a southern winter, according to a custom frequent with him, and had been moved by a miraculous prescience, unfavourable as the moment might seem, to go and ask for Nick in Calcutta Gardens, where he had extracted from his friend's

servant an address not known to all the world. He showed Nick what a mistake it had been to fear a dull arraignment, and how he habitually ignored all lapses and kept up the standard only by taking a hundred fine things for granted. He also abounded more than ever in his own sense, reminding his relieved listener how no recollection of him, no evocation of him in absence, could ever do him justice. You could n't recall him without seeming to exaggerate him, and then acknowledged, when you saw him, that your exaggeration had fallen short. He emerged out of vagueness — his Sicily might have been the Sicily of "A Winter's Tale" — and would evidently be reabsorbed in it; but his presence was positive and pervasive enough. He was duly "intense" while he lasted. His connexions were with beauty, urbanity and conversation, as usual, but they made up a circle you could n't find in the Court Guide. Nick had a sense that he knew "a lot of æsthetic people," but he dealt in ideas much more than in names and addresses. He was genial and jocose, sunburnt and romantically allusive. It was to be gathered that he had been living for many days in a Saracenic tower where his principal occupation was to watch for the flushing of the west. He had retained all the serenity of his opinions and made light, with a candour of which the only defect was apparently that it was not quite enough a conscious virtue, of many of the objects of common esteem. When Nick asked him what he had been doing he replied "Oh living, you know"; and the tone of the words offered them as the story of a great deed.

He made a long visit, staying to luncheon and after luncheon, so that the little studio heard all at once a greater quantity of brave talk than in the several previous years of its history. With much of our tale left to tell it is a pity that so little of this colloquy may be reported here; since, as affairs took their course, it marked really — if the question be of noting the exact point — a turn of the tide in Nick Dormer's personal situation. He was destined to remember the accent with which Nash exclaimed, on his drawing forth sundry specimens of amateurish earnestness: "I say — I say — I say!"

He glanced round with a heightened colour. "They're pretty bad, eh?"

"Oh you're a deep one," Nash went on.

"What's the matter?"

"Do you call your conduct that of a man of honour?"

"Scarcely perhaps. But when no one has seen them! —"

"That's your villainy. C'est de l'exquis, du pur exquis. Come, my dear fellow, this is very serious — it's a bad business," said Gabriel Nash. Then he added almost with austerity: "You'll be so good as to place before me every patch of paint, every sketch and scrap, that this room contains."

Nick complied in great good humour. He turned out his boxes and drawers, shovelled forth the contents of bulging portfolios, mounted on chairs to unhook old canvases that had been severely "skied." He was modest and docile and patient and amused, above all he was quite thrilled — thrilled with the

idea of eliciting a note of appreciation so late in the day. It was the oddest thing how he at present in fact found himself imputing value to his visitor — attributing to him, among attributions more confused, the dignity of judgement, the authority of knowledge. Nash was an ambiguous character but an excellent touchstone. The two said very little for a while, and they had almost half an hour's silence, during which, after our young man had hastily improvised an exhibition, there was only a puffing of cigarettes. Gabriel walked about, looking at this and that, taking up rough studies and laying them down, asking a question of fact, fishing with his umbrella, on the floor, amid a pile of unarranged sketches. Nick accepted jocosely the attitude of suspense, but there was even more of it in his heart than in his face. So few people had seen his young work — almost no one who really counted. He had been ashamed of it, never showing it to bring on a conclusion, since a conclusion was precisely what he feared. He whistled now while he let his companion take time. He rubbed old panels with his sleeve and dabbed wet sponges on surfaces that had sunk. It was a long time since he had felt so gay, strange as such an assertion sounds in regard to a young man whose bridal-day had at his urgent solicitation lately been fixed. He had stayed in town to be alone with his imagination, and suddenly, paradoxically, the sense of that result had arrived with poor Nash.

"Nicholas Dormer," this personage remarked at last, "for grossness of immorality I think I've never seen your equal."

"That sounds so well," Nick returned, "that I hesitate to risk spoiling it by wishing it explained."

"Don't you recognise in *any* degree the grand idea of duty?"

"If I don't grasp it with a certain firmness I'm a deadly failure, for I was quite brought up on it," Nick said.

"Then you're indeed the wretchedest failure I know. Life *is* ugly, after all."

"Do I gather that you yourself recognise obligations of the order you allude to?"

"Do you 'gather'?" Nash stared. "Why, are n't they the very flame of my faith, the burden of my song?"

"My dear fellow, duty is doing, and I've inferred that you think rather poorly of doing — that it spoils one's style."

"Doing wrong, assuredly."

"But what do you call right? What's your canon of certainty there?" Nick asked.

"The conscience that's in us — that charming conversible infinite thing, the intensest thing we know. But you must treat the oracle civilly if you wish to make it speak. You must n't stride into the temple in muddy jack-boots and with your hat on your head, as the Puritan troopers tramped into the dear old abbeys. One must do one's best to find out the right, and your criminality appears to be that you've not taken the commonest trouble."

"I had n't you to ask," smiled Nick. "But duty strikes me as doing something in particular. If you're

too afraid it may be the wrong thing you may let everything go."

"Being is doing, and if doing is duty being is duty. Do you follow?"

"At a very great distance."

"To be what one *may* be, really and efficaciously," Nash went on, "to feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it — that's conduct, that's life."

"And suppose one's a brute or an ass, where's the efficacy?"

"In one's very want of intelligence. In such cases one's out of it — the question does n't exist; one simply becomes a part of the duty of others. The brute, the ass," Nick's visitor developed, "neither feels nor understands nor accepts nor adopts. Those fine processes in themselves classify us. They educate, they exalt, they preserve; so that to profit by them we must be as perceptive as we can. We must recognise our particular form, the instrument that each of us — each of us who carries anything — carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to play it in perfection — that's what I call duty, what I call conduct, what I call success."

Nick listened with friendly attention and the air of general assent was in his face as he said: "Every one has it then, this individual pipe?"

"'Every one,' my dear fellow, is too much to say, for the world's full of the crudest *remplissage*. The book of life's padded, ah but padded — a deplorable want of editing! I speak of every one who's any one. Of course there are pipes and pipes — little quaver-

ing flutes for the concerted movements and big *cornets-à-piston* for the great solos."

"I see, I see. And what might your instrument be?"

Nash hesitated not a moment; his answer was radiantly there. "To speak to people just as I'm speaking to you. To prevent for instance a great wrong being done."

"A great wrong — ?"

"Yes — to the human race. I talk — I talk; I say the things other people don't, the things they can't, the things they won't," Gabriel went on with his inimitable candour.

"If it's a question of mastery and perfection you certainly have them," his companion replied.

"And you have n't, alas; that's the pity of it, that's the scandal. That's the wrong I want to set right before it becomes too public a shame. If I called you just now grossly immoral it's on account of the spectacle you present — a spectacle to be hidden from the eye of ingenuous youth: that of a man neglecting his own fiddle to blunder away on that of one of his fellows. We can't afford such mistakes, we can't tolerate such licence."

"You think then I *have* a fiddle?" — and our young man, in spite of himself, attached to the question a quaver of suspense finer, doubtless, than any that had ever passed his lips.

"A regular Stradivarius! All these things you've shown me are remarkably interesting. You've a talent of a wonderfully pure strain."

"I say — I say — I say!" Nick exclaimed, hover-

ing there with his hands in his pockets and a blush on his lighted face, while he repeated with a change of accent Nash's exclamation of half an hour before.

"I like it, your talent; I measure it, I appreciate it, I insist upon it," that critic went on between the whiffs of his cigarette. "I have to be awfully wise and good to do so, but fortunately I am. In such a case that's my duty. I shall make you my business for a while. Therefore," he added piously, "don't say I'm unconscious of the moral law."

"A Stradivarius?" said Nick interrogatively and with his eyes wide open. The thought in his mind was of how different this seemed from his having gone to Griffin.

XXIV

His counsellor had plenty of further opportunity to develop this and other figurative remarks, for he not only spent several of the middle hours of the day at the studio, but came back in the evening — the pair had dined together at a little foreign pothouse in Soho, revealed to Nick on this occasion — and discussed the great question far into the night. The great question was whether, on the showing of those examples of his ability with which the scene of their discourse was now densely bestrewn, Nick Dormer would be justified in "really going in" for the practice of pictorial art. This may strike many readers of his history as a limited and even trivial enquiry, with little of the heroic or the romantic in it; but it was none the less carried to the finest point by our impassioned young men. Nick suspected Nash of exaggerating his encouragement in order to play a malign trick on the political world at whose expense it was his fond fancy to divert himself — without indeed making that organisation perceptibly totter — and reminded him that his present accusation of immorality was strangely inconsistent with the wanton hope expressed by him in Paris, the hope that the Liberal candidate at Harsh would be returned. Nash replied, first, "Oh I had n't been in this place then!" but he defended himself later and more effectually by saying that it was not of Nick's having

got elected he complained: it was of his visible hesitancy to throw up his seat. Nick begged that he would n't mention this, and his gallantry failed to render him incapable of saying: "The fact is I have n't the nerve for it." They talked then for a while of what he *could* do, not of what he could n't; of the mysteries and miracles of reproduction and representation; of the strong sane joys of the artistic life. Nick made afresh, with more fulness, his great confession, that his private ideal of happiness was the life of a great painter of portraits. He uttered his thought on that head so copiously and lucidly that Nash's own abundance was stilled and he listened almost as if he had been listening to something new — difficult as it was to conceive a point of view for such a matter with which he was unacquainted.

"There it is," said Nick at last — "there's the naked preposterous truth: that if I were to do exactly as I liked I should spend my years reproducing the more or less vacuous countenances of my fellow mortals. I should find peace and pleasure and wisdom and worth, I should find fascination and a measure of success in it — out of the din and the dust and the scramble, the world of party labels, party cries, party bargains and party treacheries: of humbuggery, hypocrisy and cant. The cleanness and quietness of it, the independent effort to do something, to leave something which shall give joy to man long after the howling has died away to the last ghost of an echo — such a vision solicits me in the watches of the night with an almost irresistible force."

As he dropped these remarks he lolled on a big divan with one of his long legs folded up, while his visitor stopped in front of him after moving about the room vaguely and softly, almost on tiptoe, so as not to interrupt him. "You speak," Nash said, "with the special and dreadful eloquence that rises to a man's lips when he has practically, whatever his theory may be, renounced the right and dropped hideously into the wrong. Then his regret for the right, a certain exquisite appreciation of it, puts on an accent I know well how to recognise."

Nick looked up at him a moment. "You've hit it if you mean by that that I have n't resigned my seat and that I don't intend to."

"I thought you took it only to give it up. Don't you remember our talk in Paris?"

"I like to be a part of the spectacle that amuses you," Nick returned, "but I could scarcely have taken so much trouble as that for it."

"Is n't it then an absurd comedy, the life you lead?"

"Comedy or tragedy — I don't know which; whatever it is I appear to be capable of it to please two or three people."

"Then you *can* take trouble?" said Nash.

"Yes, for the woman I'm to marry."

"Oh you're to marry?"

"That's what has come on since we met in Paris," Nick explained, "and it makes just the difference."

"Ah my poor friend," smiled Gabriel, much arrested, "no wonder you've an eloquence, an accent!"

"It's a pity I have them in the wrong place. I'm expected to have them in the House of Commons."

"You will when you make your farewell speech there — to announce that you chuck it up. And may I venture to ask who's to be your wife?" the visitor pursued.

"Mrs. Dallow has kindly consented to accept that yoke. I think you saw her in Paris."

"Ah yes: you spoke of her to me, and I remember asking you even then if you were in love with her."

"I was n't then," said Nick.

Nash had a grave pause. "And are you now?"

"Oh dear, yes."

"That would be better — if it was n't worse."

"Nothing could be better," Nick declared. "It's the best thing that can happen to me."

"Well," his friend continued, "you must let me very respectfully approach this lady. You must let me bring her round."

"Bring her round to what?"

"To everything. Talk her over."

"Talk her under!" Nick laughed — but making his joke a little as to gain time. He remembered the effect this adviser had produced on Julia — an effect that scantly ministered to the idea of another meeting. Julia had had no occasion to allude again to Nick's imperturbable friend; he had passed out of her life at once and for ever; but there flickered up a quick memory of the contempt he had led her to express, together with a sense of how odd she would think it her intended should have thrown over two pleasant visits to cultivate such company.

"Over to a proper pride in what you may do," Nash returned — "what you may do above all if she'll help you."

"I scarcely see how she can help me," said Nick with an air of thinking.

"She's extremely handsome as I remember her. You could do great things with *her*."

"Ah there's the rub," Nick went on. "I wanted her to sit for me this week, but she would n't hear of it."

"Elle a bien tort. You should attack some fine strong type. Is Mrs. Dallow in London?" Nash enquired.

"For what do you take her? She's paying visits."

"Then I've a model for you."

"Then *you* have—?" Nick stared. "What has that to do with Mrs. Dallow's being away?"

"Does n't it give you more time?"

"Oh the time flies!" sighed Nick with a spontaneity that made his companion again laugh out — a demonstration in which for a moment he himself rather ruefully joined.

"Does she like you to paint?" that personage asked with one of his candid intonations.

"So she says."

"Well, do something fine to show her."

"I'd rather show it to you," Nick confessed.

"My dear fellow, I see it from here — if you do your duty. Do you remember the Tragic Muse?" Nash added for explanation.

"The Tragic Muse?"

"That girl in Paris, whom we heard at the old actress's and afterwards met at the charming entertain-

ment given by your cousin — is n't he? — the secretary of embassy."

"Oh Peter's girl! Of course I remember her."

"Don't call her Peter's; call her rather mine," Nash said with easy rectification. "I invented her. I introduced her. I revealed her."

"I thought you on the contrary ridiculed and repudiated her."

"As a fine handsome young woman surely not — I seem to myself to have been all the while rendering her services. I said I disliked tea-party ranters, and so I do; but if my estimate of her powers was below the mark she has more than punished me."

"What has she done?" Nick asked.

"She has become interesting, as I suppose you know."

"How should I know?"

"Well, you must see her, you must paint her," Nash returned. "She tells me something was said about it that day at Madame Carré's."

"Oh I remember — said by Peter."

"Then it will please Mr. Sherringham — you'll be glad to do that. I suppose you know all he has done for Miriam?" Gabriel pursued.

"Not a bit. I know nothing about Peter's affairs," Nick said, "unless it be in general that he goes in for mountebanks and mimes and that it occurs to me I've heard one of my sisters mention — the rumour had come to her — that he has been backing Miss Rooth."

"Miss Rooth delights to talk of his kindness; she's charming when she speaks of it. It's to his good offices that she owes her appearance here."

"Here?" Nick's interest rose. "Is she in London?"

"D'où tombez-vous? I thought you people read the papers."

"What should I read, when I sit — sometimes — through the stuff they put into them?"

"Of course I see that — that your engagement at your own variety-show, with its interminable 'turns,' keeps you from going to the others. Learn then," said Gabriel Nash, "that you've a great competitor and that you're distinctly not, much as you may suppose it, *the* rising comedian. The Tragic Muse is the great modern personage. Have n't you heard people speak of her, have n't you been taken to see her?"

Nick bethought himself. "I dare say I've heard of her, but with a good many other things on my mind I had forgotten it."

"Certainly I can imagine what has been on your mind. She remembers you at any rate; she repays neglect with sympathy. She wants," said Nash, "to come and see you."

"'See' me?" It was all for Nick now a wonder.

"To be seen by you — it comes to the same thing. She's really worth seeing: you must let me bring her; you'll find her very suggestive. That idea that you should paint her — she appears to consider it a sort of bargain."

"A bargain?" Our young man entered, as he believed, into the humour of the thing. "What will she give me?"

"A splendid model. She *is* splendid."

"Oh then bring her," said Nick.

XXV

Nash brought her, the great modern personage, as he had described her, the very next day, and it took his friend no long time to test his assurance that Miriam Rooth was now splendid. She had made an impression on him ten months before, but it had haunted him only a day, soon overlaid as it had been with other images. Yet after Nash had talked of her a while he recalled her better; some of her attitudes, some of her looks and tones began to hover before him. He was charmed in advance with the notion of painting her. When she stood there in fact, however, it seemed to him he had remembered her wrong; the brave free rather grand creature who instantly filled his studio with such an unexampled presence had so shaken off her clumsiness, the rudeness and crudeness that had made him pity her, a whole provincial and "second-rate" side. Miss Rooth was light and bright and direct to-day — direct without being stiff and bright without being garish. To Nick's perhaps inadequately sophisticated mind the model, the actress were figures of a vulgar setting; but it would have been impossible to show that taint less than this extremely natural yet extremely distinguished aspirant to distinction. She was more natural even than Gabriel Nash — "nature" was still Nick's formula for his amusing old friend — and beside her he appeared almost commonplace.

Nash recognised her superiority with a frankness honourable to both of them — testifying in this manner to his sense that they were all three serious beings, worthy to deal with fine realities. She attracted crowds to her theatre, but to his appreciation of such a fact as that, important doubtless in its way, there were the limits he had already expressed. What he now felt bound in all integrity to register was his perception that she had, in general and quite apart from the question of the box-office, a remarkable, a very remarkable, artistic nature. He allowed that she had surprised him here; knowing of her in other days mainly that she was hungry to adopt an overrated profession he had not imputed to her the normal measure of intelligence. Now he saw — he had had some talks with her — that she was capable almost of a violent play of mind; so much so that he was sorry for the embarrassment it would be to her. Nick could imagine the discomfort of having anything in the nature of a mind to arrange for in such conditions. "She's a woman of the best intentions, really of the best," Nash explained kindly and lucidly, almost paternally, "and the quite rare head you can see for yourself."

Miriam, smiling as she sat on an old Venetian chair, held aloft, with the noblest effect, that quarter of her person to which this patronage was extended, remarking to her host that, strange as it might appear, she had got quite to like poor Mr. Nash: she could make him go about with her — it was a relief to her mother.

"When I take him she has perfect peace," the girl

said; "then she can stay at home and see the interviewers. She delights in that and I hate it, so our friend here is a great comfort. Of course a *femme de théâtre* is supposed to be able to go out alone, but there's a kind of 'smartness,' an added *chic*, in having some one. People think he's my 'companion'; I'm sure they fancy I pay him. I'd pay him, if he'd take it — and perhaps he will yet! — rather than give him up, for it does n't matter that he's not a lady. He *is* one in tact and sympathy, as you see. And base as he thinks the sort of thing I do he can't keep away from the theatre. When you're celebrated people will look at you who could never before find out for themselves why they should."

"When you're celebrated you grow handsomer; at least that's what has happened to you, though you were pretty too of old," Gabriel placidly argued. "I go to the theatre to look at your head; it gives me the greatest pleasure. I take up anything of that sort as soon as I find it. One never knows how long it may last."

"Are you attributing that uncertainty to my appearance?" Miriam beautifully asked.

"Dear no, to my own pleasure, the first precious bloom of it," Nash went on. "Dormer at least, let me tell you in justice to him, has n't waited till you were celebrated to want to see you again — he stands there open-eyed — for the simple reason that he had n't the least idea of your renown. I had to announce it to him."

"Have n't you seen me act?" Miriam put, without reproach, to her host.

"I'll go to-night," he handsomely declared.

"You have your terrible House, have n't you? What do they call it — the demands of public life?" Miriam continued: in answer to which Gabriel explained that he had the demands of private life as well, inasmuch as he was in love — he was on the point of being married. She listened to this with participation; then she said: "Ah then do bring your — what do they call her in English? I'm always afraid of saying something improper — your *future*. I'll send you a box, under the circumstances; you'll like that better." She added that if he were to paint her he would have to see her often on the stage, would n't he? to profit by the *optique de la scène* — what did they call *that* in English? — studying her and fixing his impression. But before he had time to meet this proposition she asked him if it disgusted him to hear her speak like that, as if she were always posing and thinking about herself, living only to be looked at, thrusting forward her person. She already often got sick of doing so, but *à la guerre comme à la guerre*.

"That's the fine artistic nature, you see — a sort of divine disgust breaking out in her," Nash expounded.

"If you want to paint me 'at all at all' of course. I'm struck with the way I'm taking that for granted," the girl decently continued. "When Mr. Nash spoke of it to me I jumped at the idea. I remembered our meeting in Paris and the kind things you said to me. But no doubt one ought n't to jump at ideas when they represent serious sacrifices on the part of others."

"Does n't she speak well?" Nash demanded of Nick. "Oh she'll go far!"

"It's a great privilege to me to paint you: what title in the world have I to pretend to such a model?" Nick replied to Miriam. "The sacrifice is yours — a sacrifice of time and good nature and credulity. You come, in your bright beauty and your genius, to this shabby place where I've nothing worth speaking of to show, not a guarantee to offer you; and I wonder what I've done to deserve such a gift of the gods."

"Does n't *he* speak well?" — and Nash appealed with radiance to their companion.

She took no notice of him, only repeating to Nick that she had n't forgotten his friendly attitude in Paris; and when he answered that he surely had done very little she broke out, first resting her eyes on him with a deep reasonable smile and then springing up quickly: "Ah well, if I must justify myself I liked you!"

"Fancy my appearing to challenge you!" laughed Nick in deprecation. "To see you again is to want tremendously to try something. But you must have an infinite patience, because I'm an awful duffer."

She looked round the walls. "I see what you've done — *bien des choses*."

"She understands — she understands," Gabriel dropped. And he added to their visitor: "Imagine, when he might do something, his choosing a life of shams! At bottom he's like you — a wonderful artistic nature."

"I'll have patience," said the girl, smiling at Nick.

"Then, my children, I leave you — the peace of the Lord be with you." With which words Nash took his departure.

The others chose a position for the young woman's sitting after she had placed herself in many different attitudes and different lights; but an hour had elapsed before Nick got to work — began, on a large canvas, to "knock her in," as he called it. He was hindered even by the fine element of agitation, the emotion of finding himself, out of a clear sky, confronted with such a subject and launched in such a task. What could the situation be but incongruous just after he had formally renounced all manner of "art"? — the renunciation taking effect not a bit the less from the whim he had all consciously treated himself to *as* a whim (the last he should ever descend to!) the freak of a fortnight's relapse into a fingering of old sketches for the purpose, as he might have said, of burning them up, of clearing out his studio and terminating his lease. There were both embarrassment and inspiration in the strange chance of snatching back for an hour a relinquished joy: the jump with which he found he could still rise to such an occasion took away his breath a little, at the same time that the idea — the idea of what one might make of such material — touched him with an irresistible wand. On the spot, to his inner vision, Miriam became a rich result, drawing a hundred formative forces out of their troubled sleep, defying him where he privately felt strongest and imposing herself triumphantly in her own strength. He had the good fortune, without striking matches, to see her, as a

subject, in a vivid light, and his quick attempt was as exciting as a sudden gallop — he might have been astride, in a boundless field, of a runaway horse.

She was in her way so fine that he could only think how to "do" her: that hard calculation soon flattened out the consciousness, lively in him at first, that she was a beautiful woman who had sought him out in his retirement. At the end of their first sitting her having done so appeared the most natural thing in the world: he had a perfect right to entertain her there — explanations and complications were engulfed in the productive mood. The business of "knocking her in" held up a lamp to her beauty, showed him how much there was of it and that she was infinitely interesting. He did n't want to fall in love with her — that *would* be a sell, he said to himself — and she promptly became much too interesting for it. Nick might have reflected, for simplification's sake, as his cousin Peter had done, but with more validity, that he was engaged with Miss Rooth in an undertaking which did n't in the least refer to themselves, that they were working together seriously and that decent work quite gainsaid sensibility — the humbugging sorts alone had to help themselves out with it. But after her first sitting — she came, poor girl, but twice — the need of such exorcisms passed from his spirit: he had so thoroughly, so practically taken her up. As to whether his visitor had the same bright and still sense of co-operation to a definite end, the sense of the distinctively technical nature of the answer to every question to which the occasion might give birth, that mystery would be lighted only were

it open to us to regard this young lady through some other medium than the mind of her friends. We have chosen, as it happens, for some of the great advantages it carries with it, the indirect vision; and it fails as yet to tell us — what Nick of course wondered about before he ceased to care, as indeed he intimated to her — why a budding celebrity should have dreamed of there being something for her in so blighted a spot. She should have gone to one of the regular people, the great people: they would have welcomed her with open arms. When Nick asked her if some of the R. A.'s had n't expressed a wish for a crack at her she replied: "Oh dear no, only the tiresome photographers; and fancy *them* in the future. If mamma could only do *that* for me!" And she added with the charming fellowship for which she was conspicuous at these hours: "You know I don't think any one yet has been quite so much struck with me as you."

"Not even Peter Sherringham?" her host jested while he stepped back to judge of the effect of a line.

"Oh Mr. Sherringham 's different. You 're an artist."

"For pity's sake don't say that!" he cried. "And as regards *your* art I thought Peter knew more than any one."

"Ah you 're severe," said Miriam.

"Severe —?"

"Because that 's what the poor dear thinks. But he does know a lot — he has been a providence to me."

"Then why has n't he come over to see you act?"

She had a pause. "How do you know he has n't come?"

"Because I take for granted he'd have called on me if he had."

"Does he like you very much?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. I like *him*."

"He's a gentleman — *pour cela*," she said.

"Oh yes, for that!" Nick went on absently, labouring hard.

"But he's afraid of me — afraid to see me."

"Does n't he think you good enough?"

"On the contrary — he believes I shall carry him away and he's in a terror of my doing it."

"He ought to like that," said Nick with conscious folly.

"That's what I mean when I say he's not an artist. However, he declares he does like it, only it appears to be not the right thing for him. Oh the right thing — he's ravenous for that. But it's not for me to blame him, since I am too. He's coming some night, however. Then," she added almost grimly, "he shall have a dose."

"Poor Peter!" Nick returned with a compassion none the less real because it was mirthful: the girl's tone was so expressive of easy unscrupulous power.

"He's such a curious mixture," she luxuriously went on; "sometimes I quite lose patience with him. It is n't exactly trying to serve both God and Mammon, but it's muddling up the stage and the world. The world be hanged! The stage, or anything of that sort — I mean one's artistic conscience, one's true faith — comes first."

"Brava, brava! you do me good," Nick murmured, still amused, beguiled and at work. "But it's

very kind of you, when I was in this absurd state of ignorance, to impute to me the honour of having been more struck with you than any one else," he continued after a moment.

"Yes, I confess I don't quite see — when the shops were full of my photographs."

"Oh I'm so poor — I don't go into shops," he explained.

"Are you very poor?"

"I live on alms."

"And don't they pay you — the government, the ministry?"

"Dear young lady, for what? — for shutting myself up with beautiful women?"

"Ah you've others then?" she extravagantly groaned.

"They're not so kind as you, I confess."

"I'll buy it from you — what you're doing: I'll pay you well when it's done," said the girl. "I've got money now; I make it, you know — a good lot of it. It's too delightful after scraping and starving. Try it and you'll see. Give up the base bad world."

"But isn't it supposed to be the base bad world that pays?"

"Precisely; make it pay without mercy — knock it silly, squeeze it dry. That's what it's meant for — to pay for art. Ah if it wasn't for that! I'll bring you a quantity of photographs to-morrow — you must let me come back to-morrow: it's so amusing to have them, by the hundred, all for nothing, to give away. That's what takes mamma most: she can't get over it. That's luxury and glory; even at Castle

Nugent they did n't do that. People used to sketch me, but not so much as mamma *veut bien le dire;* and in all my life I never had but one poor little carte-de-visite, when I was sixteen, in a plaid frock, with the banks of a river, at three francs the dozen."

XXVI

It was success, the member for Harsh felt, that had made her finer — the full possession of her talent and the sense of the recognition of it. There was an intimation in her presence (if he had given his mind to it) that for him too the same cause would produce the same effect — that is would show him how being launched in the practice of an art makes strange and prompt revelations. Nick felt clumsy beside a person who manifestly, now, had such an extraordinary familiarity with the æsthetic point of view. He remembered too the clumsiness that had been in his visitor — something silly and shabby, pert rather than proper, and of quite another value than her actual smartness, as London people would call it, her well-appointedness and her evident command of more than one manner. Handsome as she had been the year before, she had suggested sordid lodgings, bread and butter, heavy tragedy and tears; and if then she was an ill-dressed girl with thick hair who wanted to be an actress, she was already in these few weeks a performer who could even produce an impression of not performing. She showed what a light hand she could have, forbore to startle and looked as well, for unprofessional life, as Julia: which was only the perfection of her professional character.

This function came out much in her talk, for there were many little bursts of confidence as well as many

familiar pauses as she sat there; and she was ready to tell Nick the whole history of her *début* — the chance that had suddenly turned up and that she had caught, with a fierce leap, as it passed. He missed some of the details in his attention to his own task, and some of them he failed to understand, attached as they were to the name of Mr. Basil Dashwood, which he heard for the first time. It was through Mr. Dashwood's extraordinary exertions that a hearing — a morning performance at a London theatre — had been obtained for her. That had been the great step, for it had led to the putting on at night of the play, at the same theatre, in place of a wretched thing they were trying (it was no use) to keep on its feet, and to her engagement for the principal part. She had made a hit in it — she could n't pretend not to know that; but she was already tired of it, there were so many other things she wanted to do; and when she thought it would probably run a month or two more she fell to cursing the odious conditions of artistic production in such an age. The play was a more or less idiotised version of a new French piece, a thing that had taken in Paris at a third-rate theatre and was now proving itself in London good enough for houses mainly made up of ten-shilling stalls. It was Dashwood who had said it would go if they could get the rights and a fellow to make some changes: he had discovered it at a nasty little place she had never been to, over the Seine. They had got the rights, and the fellow who had made the changes was practically Dashwood himself; there was another man in London, Mr. Gushmore — Miriam did n't know if

Nick had heard of him (Nick had n't) who had done some of it. It had been awfully chopped down, to a mere bone, with the meat all gone; but that was what people in London seemed to like. They were very innocent — thousands of little dogs amusing themselves with a bone. At any rate she had made something, she had made a figure, of the woman — a dreadful stick, with what Dashwood had muddled her into; and Miriam added in the complacency of her young expansion: "Oh give me fifty words any time and the ghost of a situation, and I 'll set you up somebody. Besides, I must n't abuse poor Yolande — she has saved us," she said.

"'Yolande' — ?"

"Our ridiculous play. That's the name of the impossible woman. She has put bread into our mouths and she's a loaf on the shelf for the future. The rights are mine."

"You're lucky to have them," said Nick a little vaguely, troubled about his sitter's nose, which was somehow Jewish without the convex arch.

"Indeed I am. He gave them to me. Was n't it charming?"

"'He' gave them — Mr. Dashwood?"

"Dear me, no — where should poor Dashwood have got them? He has n't a penny in the world. Besides, if he had got them he'd have kept them. I mean your blessed cousin."

"I see — they're a present from Peter."

"Like many other things. Is n't he a dear? If it had n't been for him the shelf would have remained bare. He bought the play for this country and Amer-

ica for four hundred pounds, and on the chance: fancy! There was no rush for it, and how could he tell? And then he gracefully pressed it on me. So I've my little capital. Is n't he a duck? You've nice cousins."

Nick assented to the proposition, only inserting an amendment to the effect that surely Peter had nice cousins too, and making, as he went on with his work, a tacit preoccupied reflexion or two; such as that it must be pleasant to render little services like that to youth, beauty and genius — he rather wondered how Peter could afford them — and that, "duck" as he was, Miss Rooth's benefactor was rather taken for granted. *Sic vos non vobis* softly sounded in his brain. This community of interests, or at least of relations, quickened the flight of time, so that he was still fresh when the sitting came to an end. It was settled Miriam should come back on the morrow, to enable her artist to make the most of the few days of the parliamentary recess; and just before she left him she asked:

"Then you *will* come to-night?"

"Without fail. I hate to lose an hour of you."

"Then I'll place you. It will be my affair."

"You're very kind" — he quite rose to it. "Is n't it a simple matter for me to take a stall? This week I suppose they're to be had."

"I'll send you a box," said Miriam. "You shall do it well. There are plenty now."

"Why should I be lost, all alone, in the grandeur of a box?"

"Can't you bring your friend?"

"My friend?"

"The lady you're engaged to."

"Unfortunately she's out of town."

Miriam looked at him in the grand manner. "Does she leave you alone like that?"

"She thought I should like it — I should be more free to paint. You see I am."

"Yes, perhaps it's good for *me*. Have you got her portrait?" Miriam asked.

"She does n't like me to paint her."

"Really? Perhaps then she won't like you to paint me."

"That's why I want to be quick!" laughed Nick.

"Before she knows it?"

"She'll know it to-morrow. I shall write to her."

The girl faced him again portentously. "I see you're afraid of her." But she added: "Mention my name; they'll give you the box at the office."

Whether or no Nick were afraid of Mrs. Dallow he still waved away this bounty, protesting that he would rather take a stall according to his wont and pay for it. Which led his guest to declare with a sudden flicker of passion that if he did n't do as she wished she would never sit to him again.

"Ah then you have me," he had to reply. "Only I *don't* see why you should give me so many things."

"What in the world have I given you?"

"Why an idea." And Nick looked at his picture rather ruefully. "I don't mean to say though that I have n't let it fall and smashed it."

"Ah an idea — that *is* a great thing for people in our line. But you'll see me much better from the box and

I'll send you Gabriel Nash." She got into the hansom her host's servant had fetched for her, and as Nick turned back into his studio after watching her drive away he laughed at the conception that they were in the same "line."

He did share, in the event, his box at the theatre with Nash, who talked during the *entr'actes* not in the least about the performance or the performer, but about the possible greatness of the art of the portraitist — its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the human race. He insisted above all on the interest, the importance of this great peculiarity of it, that unlike most other forms it was a revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist's conscious effort to reveal and the man — the interpreter — expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give. Nick Dormer had already become aware of having two states of mind when listening to this philosopher; one in which he laughed, doubted, sometimes even reprobated, failed to follow or accept, and another in which his old friend seemed to take the words out of his mouth, to utter for him, better and more completely, the very things he was on the point of saying. Gabriel's saying them at such moments appeared to make them true, to set them up in the world, and to-night he said a good many, especially as to the happiness of cultivating one's own garden,

growing there, in stillness and freedom, certain strong pure flowers that would bloom for ever, bloom long after the rank weeds of the hour were withered and blown away.

It was to keep Miriam Rooth in his eye for his current work that Nick had come to the play; and she dwelt there all the evening, being constantly on the stage. He was so occupied in watching her face — for he now saw pretty clearly what he should attempt to make of it — that he was conscious only in a secondary degree of the story she illustrated, and had in regard to her acting a surprised sense that she was extraordinarily quiet. He remembered her loudness, her violence in Paris, at Peter Sherringham's, her wild wails, the first time, at Madame Carré's; compared with which her present manner was eminently temperate and modern. Nick Dormer was not critical at the theatre; he believed what he saw and had a pleasant sense of the inevitable; therefore he would n't have guessed what Gabriel Nash had to tell him — that for this young woman, with her tragic cast and her peculiar attributes, her present performance, full of actuality, of light fine indications and at moments of pointed touches of comedy, was a rare *tour de force*. It went on altogether in a register he had n't supposed her to possess and in which, as he said, she did n't touch her capital, doing it all with her wonderful little savings. It conveyed to him that she was capable of almost anything.

In one of the intervals they went round to see her; but for Nick this purpose was partly defeated by the extravagant transports, as they struck him, of

Mrs. Rooth, whom they found sitting with her daughter and who attacked him with a hundred questions about his dear mother and his charming sisters. She had volumes to say about the day in Paris when they had shown her the kindness she should never forget. She abounded also in admiration of the portrait he had so cleverly begun, declaring she was so eager to see it, however little he might as yet have accomplished, that she should do herself the honour to wait upon him in the morning when Miriam came to sit.

"I'm acting for *you* to-night," the girl more effectively said before he returned to his place.

"No, that's exactly what you're not doing," Nash interposed with one of his happy sagacities. "You've stopped acting, you've reduced it to the least that will do, you simply *are* — you're just the visible image, the picture on the wall. It keeps you wonderfully in focus. I've never seen you so beautiful."

Miriam stared at this; then it could be seen that she coloured. "What a luxury in life to have everything explained! He's the great explainer," she herself explained to Nick.

He shook hands with her for good-night. "Well then, we must give him lots to do."

She came to his studio in the morning, but unaccompanied by her mother, in allusion to whom she simply said "Mamma wished to come but I would n't let her." They proceeded promptly to business. The girl divested herself of her hat and coat, taking the position already determined. After they had worked more than an hour with much

less talk than the day before, Nick being extremely absorbed and Miriam wearing in silence an air of noble compunction for the burden imposed on him, at the end of this period of patience, pervaded by a holy calm, our young lady suddenly got up and exclaimed "I say, I *must* see it!" — with which, quickly, she stepped down from her place and came round to the canvas. She had at Nick's request not looked at his work the day before. He fell back, glad to rest, and put down his palette and brushes.

"Ah bien, c'est tapé!" she cried as she stood before the easel. Nick was pleased with her ejaculation, he was even pleased with what he had done; he had had a long, happy spurt and felt excited and sanctioned. Miriam, retreating also a little, sank into a high-backed old-fashioned chair that stood two or three yards from the picture and reclined in it, her head on one side, looking at the rough resemblance. She made a remark or two about it, to which Nick replied, standing behind her and after a moment leaning on the top of the chair. He was away from his work and his eyes searched it with a shy fondness of hope. They rose, however, as he presently became conscious that the door of the large room opposite him had opened without making a sound and that some one stood upon the threshold. The person on the threshold was Julia Dallow.

As soon as he was aware Nick wished he had posted a letter to her the night before. He had written only that morning. There was nevertheless genuine joy in the words with which he bounded toward her — "Ah my dear Julia, what a jolly surprise!" — for

her unannounced descent spoke to him above all of an irresistible desire to see him again sooner than they had arranged. She had taken a step forward, but she had done no more, stopping short at the sight of the strange woman, so divested of visiting-gear that she looked half-undressed, who lounged familiarly in the middle of the room and over whom Nick had been still more familiarly hanging. Julia's eyes rested on this embodied unexpectedness, and as they did so she grew pale — so pale that Nick, observing it, instinctively looked back to see what Miriam had done to produce such an effect. She had done nothing at all, which was precisely what was embarrassing; she only stared at the intruder, motionless and superb. She seemed somehow in easy possession of the place, and even at that instant Nick noted how handsome she looked; so that he said to himself inaudibly, in some deeper depth of consciousness, "How I should like to paint her *that* way!" Mrs. Dallow's eyes moved for a single moment to her friend's; then they turned away — away from Miriam, ranging over the room.

"I've got a sitter, but you mustn't mind that; we're taking a rest. I'm delighted to see you" — he was all cordiality. He closed the door of the studio behind her; his servant was still at the outer door, which was open and through which he saw Julia's carriage drawn up. This made her advance a little further, but still she said nothing; she dropped no answer even when Nick went on with a sense of awkwardness: "When did you come back? I hope nothing has gone wrong. You come at a very interesting moment," he continued, aware as soon as he had

spoken of something in his words that might have made her laugh. She was far from laughing, however; she only managed to look neither at him nor at Miriam and to say, after a little, when he had repeated his question about her return:

"I came back this morning — I came straight here."

"And nothing's wrong, I hope?"

"Oh no — everything's all right," she returned very quickly and without expression. She vouchsafed no explanation of her premature descent and took no notice of the seat Nick offered her; neither did she appear to hear him when he begged her not to look yet at the work on the easel — it was in such a dreadful state. He was conscious, as he phrased it, that this request gave to Miriam's position, directly in front of his canvas, an air of privilege which her neglect to recognise in any way Mrs. Dallow's entrance or her importance did nothing to correct. But that mattered less if the appeal failed to reach Julia's intelligence, as he judged, seeing presently how deeply she was agitated. Nothing mattered in face of the sense of danger taking possession of him after she had been in the room a few moments. He wanted to say "What's the difficulty? Has anything happened?" but he felt how little she would like him to utter words so intimate in presence of the person she had been rudely startled to find between them. He pronounced Miriam's name to her and her own to Miriam, but Julia's recognition of the ceremony was so slight as to be scarcely perceptible. Miriam had the air of waiting for something more before she her-

self made a sign; and as nothing more came she continued to say nothing and not to budge. Nick added a remark to the effect that Julia would remember to have had the pleasure of meeting her the year before — in Paris, that day at old Peter's; to which Mrs. Dallow made answer "Ah yes," without any qualification, while she looked down at some rather rusty studies on panels ranged along the floor and resting against the base of the wall. Her discomposure was a clear pain to herself; she had had a shock of extreme violence, and Nick saw that as Miriam showed no symptom of offering to give up her sitting her stay would be of the briefest. He wished that young woman would do something — say she would go, get up, move about; as it was she had the appearance of watching from her point of vantage the other's upset. He made a series of enquiries about Julia's doings in the country, to two or three of which she gave answers monosyllabic and scarcely comprehensible, only turning her eyes round and round the room as in search of something she could n't find — of an escape, of something that was not Miriam. At last she said — it was at the end of a very few minutes:

"I did n't come to stay — when you're so busy. I only looked in to see if you were here. Good-bye."

"It's charming of you to have come. I'm so glad you've seen for yourself how well I'm occupied," Nick replied, not unconscious of how red he was. This made Mrs. Dallow look at him while Miriam considered them both. Julia's eyes had a strange light he had never seen before — a flash of fear by which

he was himself frightened. "Of course I'll see you later," he added in awkward, in really misplaced gaiety while she reached the door, which she opened herself, getting out with no further attention to Miriam. "I wrote to you this morning — you've missed my letter," he repeated behind her, having already given her this information. The door of the studio was very near that of the house, but before she had reached the street the visitors' bell was set ringing. The passage was narrow and she kept in advance of Nick, anticipating his motion to open the street-door. The bell was tinkling still when, by the action of her own hand, a gentleman on the step stood revealed.

"Ah my dear, don't go!" Nick heard pronounced in quick soft dissuasion and in the now familiar accents of Gabriel Nash. The rectification followed more quickly still, if that were a rectification which so little improved the matter: "I beg a thousand pardons — I thought you were Miriam."

Gabriel gave way and Julia the more sharply pursued her retreat. Her carriage, a victoria with a pair of precious heated horses, had taken a turn up the street, but the coachman had already seen his mistress and was rapidly coming back. He drew near; not so fast, however, but that Gabriel Nash had time to accompany Mrs. Dallow to the edge of the pavement with an apology for the freedom into which he had blundered. Nick was at her other hand, waiting to put her into the carriage and freshly disconcerted by the encounter with Nash, who somehow, as he stood making Julia an explanation that she

did n't listen to, looked less eminent than usual, though not more conscious of difficulties. Our young man coloured deeper and watched the footman spring down as the victoria drove up; he heard Nash say something about the honour of having met Mrs. Dallow in Paris. Nick wanted him to go into the house; he damned inwardly his lack of delicacy. He desired a word with Julia alone — as much alone as the two annoying servants would allow. But Nash was not too much discouraged to say: "You came for a glimpse of the great model? *Does* n't she sit? That's what I wanted too, this morning — just a look, for a blessing on the day. Ah but *you*, madam —"

Julia had sprung into her corner while he was still speaking and had flashed out to the coachman a "Home!" which of itself set the horses in motion. The carriage went a few yards, but while Gabriel, with an undiscouraged bow, turned away, Nick Dormer, his hand on the edge of the hood, moved with it.

"You don't like it, but I'll explain," he tried to say for its occupant alone.

"Explain what?" she asked, still very pale and grave, but in a voice that showed nothing. She was thinking of the servants — she could think of them even then.

"Oh it's all right. I'll come in at five," Nick returned, gallantly jocular, while she was whirled away.

Gabriel had gone into the studio and Nick found him standing in admiration before Miriam, who had resumed the position in which she was sitting. "Lord,

she's good to-day! Is n't she good to-day?" he broke out, seizing their host by the arm to give him a particular view. Miriam looked indeed still handsomer than before, and she had taken up her attitude again with a splendid sphinx-like air of being capable of keeping it for ever. Nick said nothing, but went back to work with a tingle of confusion, which began to act after he had resumed his palette as a sharp, a delightful stimulus. Miriam spoke never a word, but she was doubly grand, and for more than an hour, till Nick, exhausted, declared he must stop, the industrious silence was broken only by the desultory discourse of their friend.

XXVII

Nick went to Great Stanhope Street at five o'clock and learned, rather to his surprise, that Julia was not at home — to his surprise because he had told her he would come at that hour, and he attributed to her, with a certain simplicity, an eager state of mind in regard to his explanation. Apparently she was not eager; the eagerness was his own — he was eager to explain. He recognised, not without a certain consciousness of magnanimity in doing so, that there had been some reason for her quick withdrawal from his studio or at any rate for her extreme discomposure there. He had a few days before put in a plea for a snatch of worship in that sanctuary and she had accepted and approved it; but the worship, when the curtain happened to blow back, showed for that of a magnificent young woman, an actress with disordered hair, who wore in a singular degree the appearance of a person settled for many hours. The explanation was easy: it dwelt in the simple truth that when one was painting, even very badly and only for a moment, one had to have models. Nick was impatient to give it with frank, affectionate lips and a full, pleasant admission that it was natural Julia should have been startled; and he was the more impatient that, though he would not in the least have expected her to like finding a strange woman intimately installed with him, she had disliked it even

more than would have seemed probable or natural. That was because, not having heard from him about the matter, the impression was for the moment irresistible with her that a trick had been played her. But three minutes with him alone would make the difference.

They would indeed have a considerable difference to make, Nick reflected, as minutes much more numerous elapsed without bringing Mrs. Dallow home. For he had said to the butler that he would come in and wait — though it was odd she should not have left a message for him: she would doubtless return from one moment to the other. He had of course full licence to wait anywhere he preferred; and he was ushered into Julia's particular sitting-room and supplied with tea and the evening papers. After a quarter of an hour, however, he gave little attention to these beguilements, thanks to his feeling still more acutely that since she definitely knew he was coming she might have taken the trouble to be at home. He walked up and down and looked out of the window, took up her books and dropped them again, and then, as half an hour had elapsed, became aware he was really sore. What could she be about when, with London a thankless void, she was of course not paying visits? A footman came in to attend to the fire, whereupon Nick questioned him as to the manner in which she was possibly engaged. The man disclosed the fact that his mistress had gone out but a quarter of an hour before Nick's arrival, and, as if appreciating the opportunity for a little decorous conversation, gave him still more informa-

tion than he invited. From this it appeared that, as Nick knew, or could surmise, she had the evening before, from the country, wired for the victoria to meet her in the morning at Paddington and then gone straight from the station to the studio, while her maid, with her luggage, proceeded in a cab to Great Stanhope Street. On leaving the studio, however, she had not come directly home; she had chosen this unusual season for an hour's drive in the Park. She had finally re-entered her house, but had remained upstairs all day, seeing no one and not coming down to luncheon. At four o'clock she had ordered the brougham for four forty-five, and had got into it punctually, saying "To the Park!" as she did so.

Nick, after the footman had left him, made what he could of Julia's sudden passion for the banks of the Serpentine, forsaken and foggy now, inasmuch as the afternoon had come on grey and the light was waning. She usually hated the Park and hated a closed carriage. He had a gruesome vision of her, shrunken into a corner of her brougham and veiled as if in consequence of tears, revolving round the solitude of the Drive. She had of course been deeply displeased and was not herself: the motion of the carriage soothed her, had an effect on her nerves. Nick remembered that in the morning, at his door, she had appeared to be going home; so she had plunged into the drearier resort on second thoughts and as she noted herself near it. He lingered another half-hour, walked up and down the room many times and thought of many things. Had she misunderstood

him when he said he would come at five? Could n't she be sure, even if she had, that he would come early rather than late, and might n't she have left a message for him on the chance? Going out that way a few minutes before he was to come had even a little the air of a thing done on purpose to offend him; as if she had been so displeased that she had taken the nearest occasion of giving him a sign she meant to break with him. But were these the things Julia did and was that the way she did them — his fine proud delicate generous Julia?

When six o'clock came poor Nick felt distinctly resentful; but he stayed ten minutes longer on the possibility that she would in the morning have understood him to mention that hour. The April dusk began to gather and the unsociability of her behaviour, especially if she were still rumbling round the Park, became absurd. Anecdotes came back to him, vaguely remembered, heard he could n't have said when or where, of poor artists for whom life had been rendered difficult by wives who would n't allow them the use of the living female model and who made scenes if they encountered on the staircase such sources of inspiration. These ladies struck him as vulgar and odious persons, with whom it seemed grotesque that Julia should have anything in common. Of course she was not his wife yet, and of course if she were he should have washed his hands of every form of activity requiring the services of the sitter; but even these qualifications left him with a power to wince at the way in which the woman he was so sure he loved just escaped ranking herself with the Philistines.

At a quarter past six he rang a bell and told the servant who answered it that he was going and that Mrs. Dallow was to be informed as soon as she came in that he had expected to find her and had waited an hour and a quarter. But he had just reached the doorstep of departure when her brougham, emerging from the evening mist, stopped in front of the house. Nick stood there hanging back till she got out, allowing the servants only to help her. She saw him — she was less veiled than his mental vision of her; but this did n't prevent her pausing to give an order to the coachman, a matter apparently requiring some discussion. When she came to the door her visitor remarked that he had been waiting an eternity; to which she replied that he must make no grievance of that — she was too unwell to do him justice. He immediately professed regret and sympathy, adding, however, that in that case she had much better not have gone out. She made no answer to this — there were three servants in the hall who looked as if they might understand at least what was *not* said to them; only when he followed her in she asked if his idea had been to stay longer.

"Certainly, if you're not too ill to see me."

"Come in then," Julia said, turning back after having gone to the foot of the stairs.

This struck him immediately as a further restriction of his visit: she would n't readmit him to the drawing-room or to her boudoir; she would receive him in the impersonal apartment downstairs where she saw people on business. What did she want to do to him? He was prepared by this

time for a scene of jealousy, since he was sure he had learned to read her character justly in feeling that if she had the appearance of a cold woman a forked flame in her was liable on occasion to break out. She was very still, but from time to time she would fire off a pistol. As soon as he had closed the door she said without sitting down:

"I dare say you saw I did n't like that at all."

"My having a sitter in that professional way? I was very much annoyed at it myself," Nick answered.

"Why were *you* annoyed? She's very handsome," Mrs. Dallow perversely said.

"I did n't know you had looked at her!" Nick laughed.

Julia had a pause. "Was I very rude?"

"Oh it was all right; it was only awkward for me because you did n't know," he replied.

"I did know; that's why I came."

"How do you mean? My letter could n't have reached you."

"I don't know anything about your letter." Julia cast about her for a chair and then seated herself on the edge of a sofa with her eyes on the floor.

"She sat to me yesterday; she was there all the morning; but I did n't write to tell you. I went at her with great energy and, absurd as it may seem to you, found myself very tired afterwards. Besides, in the evening I went to see her act."

"Does she act?" asked Mrs. Dallow.

"She's an actress: it's her profession. Don't you remember her that day at Peter's in Paris? She's

already a celebrity; she has great talent; she's engaged at a theatre here and is making a sensation. As I tell you, I saw her last night."

"You need n't tell me," Julia returned, looking up at him with a face of which the intense, the tragic sadness startled him.

He had been standing before her, but at this he instantly sat down close, taking her passive hand. "I want to, please; otherwise it must seem so odd to you. I knew she was coming when I wrote to you the day before yesterday. But I did n't tell you then because I did n't know how it would turn out and I did n't want to exult in advance over a poor little attempt that might come to nothing. Moreover it was no use speaking of the matter at all unless I told you exactly how it had come about," Nick went on, explaining kindly and copiously. "It was the result of a visit unexpectedly paid me by Gabriel Nash."

"That man — the man who spoke to me?" Her memory of him shuddered into life.

"He did what he thought would please you, but I dare say it did n't. You met him in Paris and did n't like him; so I judged best to hold my tongue about him."

"Do *you* like him?"

"Very much."

"Mercy on us!" Julia strongly breathed.

"The reason I was annoyed was because somehow, when you came in, I suddenly had the air of having got out of those visits and shut myself up in town to do something I had kept from you. And I've been very unhappy till I could make it clear."

"You don't make it clear — you can't," she declared, turning on him eyes which, in spite of her studied stillness, expressed inward commotion. "I knew it — I knew everything; that's why I came."

"It was a sort of second sight — what they call a brain-wave," Nick smiled.

"I know nothing about those things, but I felt uneasy. I felt a kind of call; it came of a sudden yesterday. It was irresistible — nothing could have kept me this morning."

"That's very serious, but it's still more delightful. You must n't go away again," said Nick. "We must stick together — for ever and ever."

He put his arm round her, but she detached herself as soon as she felt its pressure. She rose quickly, moving away, while, mystified and chilled, he sat looking up at her as she had looked at himself a few moments before.

"I've thought it all over; I've been thinking of it all day," she began. "That's why I did n't come in."

"Don't think of it too much; it is n't worth that."

"You like it more than anything else. You do — you can't deny it," she went on.

"My dear child, what are you talking about?" Nick asked gently.

"That's what you like, doing what you were this morning; with women lolling — all their things half off — to be painted, and awful people like that man."

Nick slowly got up, wondering. "My dear Julia, apart from the surprise this morning, do you object to the living model?"

"Not a bit, for you."

"What's the inconvenience then, since in my studio they're only for me?"

"You love it, you revel in it; that's what you want — the only thing you want!" Julia broke out.

"To have models, lolling undressed women, do you mean?"

"That's what I felt, what I knew," she went on — "what came over me and haunted me yesterday so that I could n't throw it off. It seemed to me that if I could see it with my eyes and have the perfect proof I should feel better, I should be quiet. And now I *am* quiet — after a struggle of some hours, I confess. I *have* seen; the whole thing's before me and I'm satisfied."

"I'm not — to me neither the whole thing nor half of it is before me. What exactly are you talking about?" Nick demanded.

"About what you were doing this morning. That's your innermost preference, that's your secret passion."

"A feeble scratch at something serious? Yes, it was almost serious," he said. "But it was an accident, this morning and yesterday: I got on less wretchedly than I intended."

"I'm sure you've immense talent," Julia returned with a dreariness that was almost droll.

"No, no, I might have had. I've plucked it up: it's too late for it to flower. My dear Julia, I'm perfectly incompetent and perfectly resigned."

"Yes, you looked so this morning, when you hung over her. Oh she'll bring back your talent!"

"She's an obliging and even an intelligent creature,

and I've no doubt she would if she could," Nick conceded. "But I've received from you all the help any woman's destined to give me. No one can do for me again what you've done."

"I should n't try it again; I acted in ignorance. Oh I've thought it all out!" Julia declared. And then with a strange face of anguish resting on his own: "Before it's too late — before it's too late!"

"Too late for what?"

"For you to be free — for you to be free. And for me — for me to be free too. You hate everything I like!" she flashed out. "Don't pretend, don't pretend!" she went on as a sound of protest broke from him.

"I thought you so awfully *wanted* me to paint," he gasped, flushed and staring.

"I do — I do. That's why you must be free, why we must part."

"Why we must part — ?"

"Oh I've turned it well over. I've faced the hard truth. It would n't do at all!" Julia rang out.

"I like the way you talk of it — as if it were a trimming for your dress!" Nick retorted with bitterness. "Won't it do for you to be loved and cherished as well as any woman in England?"

She turned away from him, closing her eyes as not to see something dangerous. "You must n't give anything up for me. I should feel it all the while and I should hate it. I'm not afraid of the truth, but you are."

"The truth, dear Julia? I only want to know it," Nick insisted. "It seems to me in fact just what I've

got hold of. When two persons are united by the tenderest affection and are sane and generous and just, no difficulties that occur in the union their life makes for them are insurmountable, no problems are insoluble."

She appeared for a moment to reflect upon this: it was spoken in a tone that might have touched her. Yet at the end of the moment, lifting her eyes, she brought out: "I hate art, as you call it. I thought I did, I knew I did; but till this morning I did n't know how much."

"Bless your dear soul, *that* was n't art," Nick pleaded. "The real thing will be a thousand miles away from us; it will never come into the house, *soyez tranquille*. It knows where to look in and where to flee shrieking. Why then should you worry?"

"Because I want to understand, I want to know what I 'm doing. You 're an artist: you are, you are!" Julia cried, accusing him passionately.

"My poor Julia, it is n't so easy as that, nor a character one can take on from one day to the other. There are all sorts of things; one must be caught young and put through the mill — one must see things as they are. There are very few professions *that* goes with. There would be sacrifices I never can make."

"Well then, there are sacrifices for both of us, and I can't make them either. I dare say it's all right for you, but for me it would be a terrible mistake. When I think I 'm doing a certain thing I must n't do just the opposite," she kept on as for true lucidity. "There are things I've thought of, the things I like

best; and they're not what you mean. It would be a great deception, and it's not the way I see my life, and it would be misery if we don't understand."

He looked at her with eyes not lighted by her words. "If we don't understand what?"

"That we're utterly different — that you're doing it all for *me*."

"And is that an objection to me — what I do for you?" he asked.

"You do too much. You're awfully good, you're generous, you're a dear, oh yes — a dear. But that does n't make me believe in it. I did n't at bottom, from the first — that's why I made you wait, why I gave you your freedom. Oh I've suspected you," Julia continued, "I had my ideas. It's all right for you, but it won't do for me: I'm different altogether. Why should it always be put upon me when I hate it? What have I done? I was drenched with it before." These last words, as they broke forth, were attended with a quick blush; so that Nick could as quickly discern in them the uncalculated betrayal of an old irritation, an old shame almost — her late husband's flat inglorious taste for pretty things, his indifference to every chance to play a public part. This had been the humiliation of her youth, and it was indeed a perversity of fate that a new alliance should contain for her even an oblique demand for the same spirit of accommodation, impose on her the secret bitterness of the same concessions. As Nick stood there before her, struggling sincerely with the force that he now felt to be strong in her, the intense resolution to break with him, a force matured in a few hours, he read

a riddle that hitherto had baffled him, saw a great mystery become simple. A personal passion for him had all but thrown her into his arms (the sort of thing that even a vain man — and Nick was not especially vain — might hesitate to recognise the strength of); held in check at moments, with a strain of the cord that he could still feel vibrate, by her deep, her rare ambition, and arrested at the last only just in time to save her calculations. His present glimpse of the immense extent of these calculations did n't make him think her cold or poor; there was in fact a positive strange heat in them and they struck him rather as grand and high. The fact that she could drop him even while she longed for him — drop him because it was now fixed in her mind that he would n't after all serve her resolve to be associated, so far as a woman could, with great affairs; that she could postpone, and postpone to an uncertainty, the satisfaction of an aching tenderness and plan for the long run — this exhibition of will and courage, of the larger scheme that possessed her, commanded his admiration on the spot. He paid the heavy price of the man of imagination; he was capable of far excursions of the spirit, disloyalties to habit and even to faith, he was open to rare communications. He ached, on his side, for the moment, to convince her that he would achieve what he would n't, for the vision of his future she had tried to entertain shone before him as a bribe and a challenge. It struck him there was nothing he could n't work for enough with her to be so worked with by her. Presently he said:

"You want to be sure the man you marry will be

prime minister of England. But how can you be really sure with any one?"

"I can be really sure some men won't!" Julia returned.

"The only safe thing perhaps would be to marry Mr. Macgeorge," he suggested.

"Possibly not even him."

"You're a prime minister yourself," Nick made answer. "To hold fast to you as I hold, to be determined to be of your party — is n't *that* political enough, since you're the incarnation of politics?"

"Ah how you hate them!" she wailed again. "I saw that when I saw you this morning. The whole place reeked of your aversion."

"My dear child, the greatest statesmen have had their distractions. What do you make of my hereditary talent? That's a tremendous force."

"It would n't carry you far." Then she terribly added "You must be a great artist." He tossed his head at the involuntary contempt of this, but she went on: "It's beautiful of you to want to give up anything, and I like you for it. I shall always like you. We shall be friends, and I shall always take an interest —!"

But he stopped her there, made a movement which interrupted her phrase, and she suffered him to hold her hand as if she were not afraid of him now. "It is n't only for you," he argued gently; "you're a great deal, but you're not everything. Innumerable vows and pledges repose upon my head. I'm inextricably committed and dedicated. I was brought up in the temple like an infant Samuel; my father

was a high-priest and I'm a child of the Lord. And then the life itself — when *you* speak of it I feel stirred to my depths; it's like a herald's trumpet. Fight *with* me, Julia — not against me! Be on my side and we shall do everything. It *is* uplifting to be a great man before the people — to be loved by them, to be followed by them. An artist is n't — never, never. Why *should* he be? Don't forget how clever I am."

"Oh if it was n't for that!" she panted, pale with the effort to resist his tone. Then she put it to him: "Do you pretend that if I were to die to-morrow you'd stay in the House?"

"If you were to die? God knows! But you do singularly little justice to my incentives," he pursued. "My political career's everything to my mother."

This but made her say after a moment: "Are you afraid of your mother?"

"Yes, immensely; for she represents ever so many possibilities of disappointment and distress. She represents all my father's as well as all her own, and in them my father tragically lives again. On the other hand I see him in bliss, as I see my mother, over our marriage and our life of common aspirations — though of course that's not a consideration that I can expect to have power with you."

She shook her head slowly, even smiling with her recovered calmness and lucidity. "You'll never hold high office."

"But why not take me as I am?"

"Because I'm abominably keen about that sort of thing — I must recognise my keenness. I must

face the ugly truth. I've been through the worst; it's all settled."

"The worst, I suppose, was when you found me this morning."

"Oh that was all right — for you."

"You're magnanimous, Julia; but evidently what's good enough for me is n't good enough for you." Nick spoke with bitterness.

"I don't like you enough — that's the obstacle," she held herself in hand to say.

"You did a year ago; you confessed to it."

"Well, a year ago was a year ago. Things are changed to-day."

"You're very fortunate — to be able to throw away a real devotion," Nick returned.

She had her pocket-handkerchief in her hand, and at this she quickly pressed it to her lips as to check an exclamation. Then for an instant she appeared to be listening to some sound from outside. He interpreted her movement as an honourable impulse to repress the "Do you mean the devotion I was witness of this morning?" But immediately afterwards she said something very different: "I thought I heard a ring. I've telegraphed for Mrs. Gresham."

He wondered. "Why did you do that?"

"Oh I want her."

He walked to the window, where the curtains had not been drawn, and saw in the dusk a cab at the door. When he turned back he went on: "Why won't you trust me to make you like me, as you call it, better? If I make you like me as well as I like you it will be about enough, I think."

"Oh I like you enough for *your* happiness. And I don't throw away a devotion," Mrs. Dallow continued. "I shall be constantly kind to you. I shall be beautiful to you."

"You'll make me lose a fortune," Nick after a moment said.

It brought a slight convulsion, instantly repressed, into her face. "Ah you may have all the money you want!"

"I don't mean yours," he answered with plenty of expression of his own. He had determined on the instant, since it might serve, to tell her what he had never breathed to her before. "Mr. Carteret last year promised me a pot of money on the day we should be man and wife. He has thoroughly set his heart on it."

"I'm sorry to disappoint Mr. Carteret," said Julia. "I'll go and see him. I'll make it all right," she went on. "Then your work, you know, will bring you an income. The great men get a thousand just for a head."

"I'm only joking," Nick returned with sombre eyes that contradicted this profession. "But what things you deserve I should do!"

"Do you mean striking likenesses?"

He watched her a moment. "You do hate it! Pushed to that point, it's curious," he audibly mused.

"Do you mean you're joking about Mr. Carteret's promise?"

"No — the promise is real, but I don't seriously offer it as a reason."

"I shall go to Beauclere," Julia said. "You're an hour late," she added in a different tone; for at that moment the door of the room was thrown open and Mrs. Gresham, the butler pronouncing her name, ushered in.

"Ah don't impugn my punctuality — it's my character!" the useful lady protested, putting a sixpence from the cabman into her purse. Nick went off at this with a simplified farewell — went off foreseeing exactly what he found the next day, that the useful lady would have received orders not to budge from her hostess's side. He called on the morrow, late in the afternoon, and Julia saw him liberally, in the spirit of her assurance that she would be "beautiful" to him, that she had not thrown away his devotion; but Mrs. Gresham remained, with whatever delicacies of deprecation, a spectator of her liberality. Julia looked at him kindly, but her companion was more benignant still; so that what Nick did with his own eyes was not to appeal to her to see him a moment alone, but to solicit, in the name of this luxury, the second occupant of the drawing-room. Mrs. Gresham seemed to say, while Julia said so little, "I understand, my poor friend, I know everything — she has told me only *her* side, but I'm so competent that I know yours too — and I enter into the whole thing deeply. But it would be as much as my place is worth to accommodate you." Still, she did n't go so far as to give him an inkling of what he learned on the third day and what he had not gone so far as to suspect — that the two ladies had made rapid arrangements for a scheme of foreign travel.

These arrangements had already been carried out when, at the door of the house in Great Stanhope Street, the announcement was made him that the subtle creatures had started that morning for Paris.

XXVIII

THEY spent on their way to Florence several days in Paris, where Peter Sherringham had as much free talk with his sister as it often befell one member of their family to have with another. He enjoyed, that is, on two different occasions, half an hour's gossip with her in her sitting-room at the hotel. On one of these he took the liberty of asking her whether or no, decidedly, she meant to marry Nick Dormer. Julia expressed to him that she appreciated his curiosity, but that Nick and she were nothing more than relations and good friends. "He tremendously wants it," Peter none the less observed; to which she simply made answer, "Well then, he may want!"

After this, for a while, they sat as silent as if the subject had been quite threshed out between them. Peter felt no impulse to penetrate further, for it was not a habit of the Sherringhams to talk with each other of their love-affairs; and he was conscious of the particular deterrent that he and Julia entertained in general such different sentiments that they could never go far together in discussion. He liked her and was sorry for her, thought her life lonely and wondered she did n't make a "great" marriage. Moreover he pitied her for being without the interests and consolations he himself had found substantial: those of the intellectual, the studious order he considered these to be, not knowing how much she

supposed she reflected and studied and what an education she had found in her political aspirations, viewed by him as scarce more a personal part of her than the livery of her servants or the jewels George Dallow's money had bought. Her relations with Nick struck him as queer, but were fortunately none of his business. No business of Julia's was sufficiently his to justify him in an attempt to understand it. That there should have been a question of her marrying Nick was the funny thing rather than that the question should have been dropped. He liked his clever cousin very well as he was — enough for a vague sense that he might be spoiled by alteration to a brother-in-law. Moreover, though not perhaps distinctly conscious of this, Peter pressed lightly on Julia's doings from a tacit understanding that in this case she would let him off as easily. He could n't have said exactly what it was he judged it pertinent to be let off from: perhaps from irritating enquiry as to whether he had given any more tea-parties for gross young women connected with the theatre.

Peter's forbearance, however, brought him not quite all the security he prefigured. After an interval he indeed went so far as to ask Julia if Nick had been wanting in respect to her; but this was an appeal intended for sympathy, not for other intervention. She answered: "Dear no — though he 's very provoking." Thus Peter guessed that they had had a quarrel in which it did n't concern him to meddle: he added her epithet and her flight from England together, and they made up to his perception one of the little magnified embroilments which

do duty for the real in superficial lives. It was worse to provoke Julia than not, and Peter thought Nick's doing so not particularly characteristic of his versatility for good. He might wonder why she did n't marry the member for Harsh if the subject had pressingly come up between them; but he wondered still more why Nick did n't marry that gentleman's great backer. Julia said nothing again, as if to give him a chance to address her some challenge that would save her from gushing; but as his impulse appeared to be to change the subject, and as he changed it only by silence, she was reduced to resuming presently:

"I should have thought you'd have come over to see your friend the actress."

"Which of my friends? I know so many actresses," Peter pleaded.

"The woman you inflicted on us in this place a year ago — the one who's in London now."

"Oh Miriam Rooth? I should have liked to come over, but I've been tied fast. Have you seen her there?"

"Yes, I've seen her."

"Do you like her?"

"Not at all."

"She has a lovely voice," Peter hazarded after a moment.

"I don't know anything about her voice — I have n't heard it."

"But she does n't act in pantomime, does she?"

"I don't know anything about her acting. I saw her in private — at Nick Dormer's studio."

"At Nick's — ?" He was interested now. "What was she doing there ?"

"She was sprawling over the room and — rather insolently — staring at me."

If Mrs. Dallow had wished to "draw" her brother she must at this point have suspected she succeeded, in spite of his care to divest his tone of all emotion. "Why, does he know her so well ? I did n't know."

"She's sitting to him for her portrait — at least she was then."

"Oh yes, I remember — I put him up to that. I'm greatly interested. Is the portrait good ?"

"I have n't the least idea — I did n't look at it. I dare say it's like," Julia threw off.

"But how in the world" — and Peter's interest grew franker — "does Nick find time to paint ?"

"I don't know. That horrid man brought her."

"Which horrid man ?" — he spoke as if they had their choice.

"The one Nick thinks so clever — the vulgar little man who was at your place that day and tried to talk to me. I remember he abused theatrical people to me — as if I cared anything about them. But he has apparently something to do with your girl."

"Oh I recollect him — I had a discussion with him," Peter patiently said.

"How could you ? I must go and dress," his sister went on more importantly.

"He *was* clever, remarkably. Miss Rooth and her mother were old friends of his, and he was the first person to speak of them to me."

"What a distinction! I thought him disgusting!" cried Julia, who was pressed for time and who had now got up.

"Oh you're severe," said Peter, still bland; but when they separated she had given him something to think of.

That Nick was painting a beautiful actress was no doubt in part at least the reason why he was provoking and why his most intimate female friend had come abroad. The fact did n't render him provoking to his kinsman: Peter had on the contrary been quite sincere when he qualified it as interesting. It became indeed on reflexion so interesting that it had perhaps almost as much to do with Sherringham's now prompt rush over to London as it had to do with Julia's coming away. Reflexion taught him further that the matter was altogether a delicate one and suggested that it was odd he should be mixed up with it in fact when, as Julia's own affair, he had but wished to keep out of it. It might after all be his affair a little as well — there was somehow a still more pointed implication of that in his sister's saying to him the next day that she wished immensely he would take a fancy to Biddy Dormer. She said more: she said there had been a time when she believed he *had* done so — believed too that the poor child herself had believed the same. Biddy was far away the nicest girl she knew — the dearest, sweetest, cleverest, *best*, and one of the prettiest creatures in England, which never spoiled anything. She would make as charming a wife as ever a man had, suited to any position, however high, and —

Julia did n't mind mentioning it, since her brother would believe it whether she mentioned it or no — was so predisposed in his favour that he would have no trouble at all. In short she herself would see him through — she 'd answer for it that he 'd have but to speak. Biddy's life at home was horrid; she was very sorry for her — the child was worthy of a better fate. Peter wondered what constituted the horridness of Biddy's life, and gathered that it mainly arose from the fact of Julia's disliking Lady Agnes and Grace and of her profiting comfortably by that freedom to do so which was a fruit of her having given them a house she had perhaps not felt the want of till they were in possession of it. He knew she had always liked Biddy, but he asked himself — this was the rest of his wonder — why she had taken to liking her so extraordinarily just now. He liked her himself — he even liked to be talked to about her and could believe everything Julia said: the only thing that had mystified him was her motive for suddenly saying it. He had assured her he was perfectly sensible of her goodness in so plotting out his future, but was also sorry if he had put it into any one's head — most of all into the girl's own — that he had ever looked at Biddy with a covetous eye. He was n't in the least sure she would make a good wife, but liked her quite too much to wish to put any such mystery to the test. She was certainly not offered them for cruel experiments. As it happened, really, he was n't thinking of marrying any one — he had ever so many grounds for neglecting that. Of course one was never safe against accidents, but one could at least take precautions,

and he did n't mind telling her that there were several he had taken.

"I don't know what you mean, but it seems to me quite the best precaution would be to care for a charming steady girl like Biddy. Then you'd be quite in shelter, you'd know the worst that can happen to you, and it would n't be bad." The objection he had made to this plea is not important, especially as it was not quite candid; it need only be mentioned that before the pair parted Julia said to him, still in reference to their young friend: "Do go and see her and be nice to her: she'll save you disappointments."

These last words reverberated for him— there was a shade of the portentous in them and they seemed to proceed from a larger knowledge of the subject than he himself as yet possessed. They were not absent from his memory when, in the beginning of May, availing himself, to save time, of the night-service, he crossed from Paris to London. He arrived before the breakfast-hour and went to his sister's house in Great Stanhope Street, where he always found quarters, were she in town or not. When at home she welcomed him, and in her absence the relaxed servants hailed him for the chance he gave them to recover their "form." In either case his allowance of space was large and his independence complete. He had obtained permission this year to take in scattered snatches rather than as a single draught the quantum of holiday to which he was entitled; and there was moreover a question of his being transferred to another capital — in which event he believed he might

count on a month or two in England before proceeding to his new post.

He waited, after breakfast, but a very few minutes before jumping into a hansom and rattling away to the north. A part of his waiting indeed consisted of a fidgety walk up Bond Street, during which he looked at his watch three or four times while he paused at shop-windows for fear of being a little early. In the cab, as he rolled along, after having given an address — Balaklava Place, Saint John's Wood — the fear he might be too early took curiously at moments the form of a fear that he should be too late: a symbol of the inconsistencies of which his spirit at present was full. Peter Sherringham was nervously formed, too nervously for a diplomatist, and haunted with inclinations and indeed with designs which contradicted each other. He wanted to be out of it and yet dreaded not to be in it, and on this particular occasion the sense of exclusion was an ache. At the same time he was not unconscious of the impulse to stop his cab and make it turn round and drive due south. He saw himself launched in the breezy fact while morally speaking he was hauled up on the hot sand of the principle, and he could easily note how little these two faces of the same idea had in common. However, as the consciousness of going helped him to reflect, a principle was a poor affair if it merely became a fact. Yet from the hour it did turn to action the action *had* to be the particular one in which he was engaged; so that he was in the absurd position of thinking his conduct wiser for the reason that it was directly opposed to his intentions.

He had kept away from London ever since Miriam Rooth came over; resisting curiosity, sympathy, importunate haunting passion, and considering that his resistance, founded, to be salutary, on a general scheme of life, was the greatest success he had yet achieved. He was deeply occupied with plucking up the feeling that attached him to her, and he had already, by various little ingenuities, loosened some of its roots. He had suffered her to make her first appearance on any stage without the comfort of his voice or the applause of his hand; saying to himself that the man who could do the more could do the less and that such an act of fortitude was a proof he should keep straight. It was not exactly keeping straight to run over to London three months later and, the hour he arrived, scramble off to Balaklava Place; but after all he pretended only to be human and aimed in behaviour only at the heroic, never at the monstrous. The highest heroism was obviously three parts tact. He had not written to his young friend that he was coming to England and would call upon her at eleven o'clock in the morning, because it was his secret pride that he had ceased to correspond with her. Sherringham took his prudence where he could find it, and in doing so was rather like a drunkard who should flatter himself he had forsworn liquor since he did n't touch lemonade.

It is a sign of how far he was drawn in different directions at once that when, on reaching Balaklava Place and alighting at the door of a small detached villa of the type of the "retreat," he learned that Miss Rooth had but a quarter of an hour before quitted

the spot with her mother — they had gone to the theatre, to rehearsal, said the maid who answered the bell he had set tinkling behind a stuccoed garden-wall: when at the end of his pilgrimage he was greeted by a disappointment he suddenly found himself relieved and for the moment even saved. Providence was after all taking care of him and he submitted to Providence. He would still be watched over doubtless, even should he follow the two ladies to the theatre, send in his card and obtain admission to the scene of their experiments. All his keen taste for these matters flamed up again, and he wondered what the girl was studying, was rehearsing, what she was to do next. He got back into his hansom and drove down the Edgware Road. By the time he reached the Marble Arch he had changed his mind again, had determined to let Miriam alone for that day. It would be over at eight in the evening — he hardly played fair — and then he should consider himself free. Instead of pursuing his friends he directed himself upon a shop in Bond Street to take a place for their performance. On first coming out he had tried, at one of those establishments strangely denominated "libraries," to get a stall, but the people to whom he applied were unable to accommodate him — they had n't a single seat left. His actual attempt, at another library, was more successful: there was no question of obtaining a stall, but he might by a miracle still have a box. There was a wantonness in paying for a box at a play on which he had already expended four hundred pounds; but while he was mentally measuring this

abyss an idea came into his head which flushed the extravagance with the hue of persuasion.

Peter came out of the shop with the voucher for the box in his pocket, turned into Piccadilly, noted that the day was growing warm and fine, felt glad that this time he had no other strict business than to leave a card or two on official people, and asked himself where he should go if he did n't go after Miriam. Then it was that he found himself attaching a lively desire and imputing a high importance to the possible view of Nick Dormer's portrait of her. He wondered which would be the natural place at that hour of the day to look for the artist. The House of Commons was perhaps the nearest one, but Nick, inconsequent and incalculable though so many of his steps, probably did n't keep the picture there; and moreover it was not generally characteristic of him to be in the natural place. The end of Peter's debate was that he again entered a hansom and drove to Calcutta Gardens. The hour was early for calling, but cousins with whom one's intercourse was mainly a conversational scuffle would accept it as a practical illustration of that method. And if Julia wanted him to be nice to Biddy — which was exactly, even if with a different view, what he wanted himself — how could he better testify than by a visit to Lady Agnes — he would have in decency to go to see her some time — at a friendly fraternizing hour when they would all be likely to be at home?

Unfortunately, as it turned out, they were none of them at home, so that he had to fall back on neutrality and the butler, who was, however, more luckily, an

old friend. Her ladyship and Miss Dormer were absent from town, paying a visit; and Mr. Dormer was also away, or was on the point of going away for the day. Miss Bridget was in London, but was out; Peter's informant mentioned with earnest vagueness that he thought she had gone somewhere to take a lesson. On Peter's asking what sort of lesson he meant he replied: "Oh I think — a — the a-sculpture, you know, sir." Peter knew, but Biddy's lesson in "a-sculpture" — it sounded on the butler's lips like a fashionable new art — struck him a little as a mockery of the helpful spirit in which he had come to look her up. The man had an air of participating respectfully in his disappointment and, to make up for it, added that he might perhaps find Mr. Dormer at his other address. He had gone out early and had directed his servant to come to Rosedale Road in an hour or two with a portmanteau: he was going down to Beauclere in the course of the day, Mr. Carteret being ill — perhaps Mr. Sherringham did n't know it. Perhaps too Mr. Sherringham would catch him in Rosedale Road before he took his train — he was to have been busy there for an hour. This was worth trying, and Peter immediately drove to Rosedale Road; where in answer to his ring the door was opened to him by Biddy Dormer.

XXIX

When that young woman saw him her cheek exhibited the prettiest pleased surprised red he had ever observed there, though far from unacquainted with its living tides, and she stood smiling at him with the outer dazzle in her eyes, still making him no motion to enter. She only said "Oh Peter!" and then "I'm all alone."

"So much the better, dear Biddy. Is that any reason I should n't come in?"

"Dear no — do come in. You've just missed Nick; he has gone to the country — half an hour ago." She had on a large apron and in her hand carried a small stick, besmeared, as his quick eye saw, with modelling-clay. She dropped the door and fled back before him into the studio, where, when he followed her, she was in the act of flinging a damp cloth over a rough head, in clay, which, in the middle of the room, was supported on a high wooden stand. The effort to hide what she had been doing before he caught a glimpse of it made her redder still and led to her smiling more, to her laughing with a confusion of shyness and gladness that charmed him. She rubbed her hands on her apron, she pulled it off, she looked delightfully awkward, not meeting Peter's eye, and she said: "I'm just scraping here a little — you must n't mind me. What I do is awful, you know. *Please*, Peter, don't look. I've been coming

here lately to make my little mess, because mamma does n't particularly like it at home. I've had a lesson or two from a lady who exhibits, but you would n't suppose it to see what I do. Nick's so kind; he lets me come here; he uses the studio so little; I do what I want, or rather what I can. What a pity he's gone — he'd have been so glad. I'm really alone — I hope you don't mind. Peter, *please* don't look."

Peter was not bent on looking; his eyes had occupation enough in Biddy's own agreeable aspect, which was full of a rare element of domestication and responsibility. Though she had, stretching her bravery, taken possession of her brother's quarters, she struck her visitor as more at home and more herself than he had ever seen her. It was the first time she had been, to his notice, so separate from her mother and sister. She seemed to know this herself and to be a little frightened by it — just enough to make him wish to be reassuring. At the same time Peter also, on this occasion, found himself touched with diffidence, especially after he had gone back and closed the door and settled down to a regular call; for he became acutely conscious of what Julia had said to him in Paris and was unable to rid himself of the suspicion that it had been said with Biddy's knowledge. It was n't that he supposed his sister had told the girl she meant to do what she could to make him propose to her: that would have been cruel to her — if she liked him enough to consent — in Julia's perfect uncertainty. But Biddy participated by imagination, by divination, by a clever

girl's secret tremulous instincts, in her good friend's views about her, and this probability constituted for Sherringham a sort of embarrassing publicity. He had impressions, possibly gross and unjust, in regard to the way women move constantly together amid such considerations and subtly intercommunicate, when they don't still more subtly dissemble, the hopes or fears of which persons of the opposite sex form the subject. Therefore poor Biddy would know that if she failed to strike him in the right light it would n't be for want of an attention definitely called to her claims. She would have been tacitly rejected, virtually condemned. He could n't without an impulse of fatuity endeavour to make up for this to her by consoling kindness; he was aware that if any one knew it a man would be ridiculous who should take so much as that for granted. But no one would know it: he oddly enough in this calculation of security left Biddy herself out. It did n't occur to him that she might have a secret small irony to spare for his ingenious and magnanimous effort to show her how much he liked her in reparation to her for not liking her more. This high charity coloured at any rate the whole of his visit to Rosedale Road, the whole of the pleasant prolonged chat that kept him there more than an hour. He begged the girl to go on with her work, not to let him interrupt it; and she obliged him at last, taking the cloth off the lump of clay and giving him a chance to be delightful by guessing that the shapeless mass was intended, or would be intended after a while, for Nick. He saw she was more comfortable when she

began again to smooth it and scrape it with her little stick, to manipulate it with an ineffectual air of knowing how; for this gave her something to do, relieved her nervousness and permitted her to turn away from him when she talked.

He walked about the room and sat down; got up and looked at Nick's things; watched her at moments in silence — which made her always say in a minute that he was not to pass judgement or she could do nothing; observed how her position before her high stand, her lifted arms, her turns of the head, considering her work this way and that, all helped her to be pretty. She repeated again and again that it was an immense pity about Nick, till he was obliged to say he did n't care a straw for Nick and was perfectly content with the company he found. This was not the sort of tone he thought it right, given the conditions, to take; but then even the circumstances did n't require him to pretend he liked her less than he did. After all she was his cousin; she would cease to be so if she should become his wife; but one advantage of her not entering into that relation was precisely that she would remain his cousin. It was very pleasant to find a young bright slim rose-coloured kinswoman all ready to recognise consanguinity when one came back from cousinless foreign lands. Peter talked about family matters; he did n't know, in his exile, where no one took an interest in them, what a fund of latent curiosity about them he treasured. It drew him on to gossip accordingly and to feel how he had with Biddy indefeasible properties in common — ever so many things as to which they'd

always understand each other *à demi-mot.* He smoked a cigarette because she begged him — people always smoked in studios and it made her feel so much more an artist. She apologised for the badness of her work on the ground that Nick was so busy he could scarcely ever give her a sitting; so that she had to do the head from photographs and occasional glimpses. They had hoped to be able to put in an hour that morning, but news had suddenly come that Mr. Carteret was worse, and Nick had hurried down to Beauclere. Mr. Carteret was very ill, poor old dear, and Nick and he were immense friends. Nick had always been charming to him. Peter and Biddy took the concerns of the houses of Dormer and Sherringham in order, and the young man felt after a little as if they were as wise as a French *conseil de famille* and settling what was best for every one. He heard all about Lady Agnes; he showed an interest in the detail of her existence that he had not supposed himself to possess, though indeed Biddy threw out intimations which excited his curiosity, presenting her mother in a light that might call on his sympathy.

"I don't think she has been very happy or very pleased of late," the girl said. "I think she has had some disappointments, poor dear mamma; and Grace has made her go out of town for three or four days in the hope of a little change. They've gone down to see an old lady, Lady St. Dunstans, who never comes to London now and who, you know — she's tremendously old — was papa's godmother. It's not very lively for Grace, but Grace is such a dear she'll do anything for mamma. Mamma will go anywhere,

no matter at what risk of discomfort, to see people she can talk with about papa."

Biddy added in reply to a further question that what her mother was disappointed about was — well, themselves, her children and all their affairs; and she explained that Lady Agnes wanted all kinds of things for them that did n't come, that they did n't get or seem likely to get, so that their life appeared altogether a failure. She wanted a great deal, Biddy admitted; she really wanted everything, for she had thought in her happier days that everything was to be hers. She loved them all so much and was so proud too: she could n't get over the thought of their not being successful. Peter was unwilling to press at this point, for he suspected one of the things Lady Agnes wanted; but Biddy relieved him a little by describing her as eager above all that Grace should get married.

"That's too unselfish of her," he pronounced, not caring at all for Grace. "Cousin Agnes ought to keep her near her always, if Grace is so obliging and devoted."

"Oh mamma would give up anything of that sort for our good; she would n't sacrifice us that way!" Biddy protested. "Besides, I'm the one to stay with mamma; not that I can manage and look after her and do everything so well as Grace. But, you know, I *want* to," said Biddy with a liquid note in her voice — and giving her lump of clay a little stab for mendacious emphasis.

"But does n't your mother want the rest of you to get married — Percival and Nick and you?" Peter asked.

"Oh she has given up Percy. I don't suppose she thinks it would do. Dear Nick of course — that 's just what she does want."

He had a pause. "And you, Biddy?"

"Oh I dare say. But that does n't signify — I never shall."

Peter got up at this; the tone of it set him in motion and he took a turn round the room. He threw off something cheap about her being too proud; to which she replied that that was the only thing for a girl to be to get on.

"What do you mean by getting on?" — and he stopped with his hands in his pockets on the other side of the studio.

"I mean crying one's eyes out!" Biddy unexpectedly exclaimed; but she drowned the effect of this pathetic paradox in a laugh of clear irrelevance and in the quick declaration: "Of course it's about Nick that she's really broken-hearted."

"What's the matter with Nick?" he went on with all his diplomacy.

"Oh Peter, what's the matter with Julia?" Biddy quavered softly back to him, her eyes suddenly frank and mournful. "I dare say you know what we all hoped, what we all supposed from what they told us. And now they won't!" said the girl.

"Yes, Biddy, I know. I had the brightest prospect of becoming your brother-in-law: would n't that have been it — or something like that? But it's indeed visibly clouded. What's the matter with them? May I have another cigarette?" Peter came back to the wide, cushioned bench where he had

previously lounged: this was the way they took up the subject he wanted most to look into. "Don't they know how to love?" he speculated as he seated himself again.

"It seems a kind of fatality!" Biddy sighed.

He said nothing for some moments, at the end of which he asked if his companion were to be quite alone during her mother's absence. She replied that this parent was very droll about that: would never leave her alone and always thought something dreadful would happen to her. She had therefore arranged that Florence Tressilian should come and stay in Calcutta Gardens for the next few days — to look after her and see she did no wrong. Peter enquired with fulness into Florence Tressilian's identity: he greatly hoped that for the success of Lady Agnes's precautions she was n't a flighty young genius like Biddy. She was described to him as tremendously nice and tremendously clever, but also tremendously old and tremendously safe; with the addition that Biddy was tremendously fond of her and that while she remained in Calcutta Gardens they expected to enjoy themselves tremendously. She was to come that afternoon before dinner.

"And are you to dine at home?" said Peter.

"Certainly; where else?"

"And just you two alone? Do you call that enjoying yourselves tremendously?"

"It will do for me. No doubt I ought n't in modesty to speak for poor Florence."

"It is n't fair to her; you ought to invite some one to meet her."

"Do you mean you, Peter?" the girl asked, turning to him quickly and with a look that vanished the instant he caught it.

"Try me. I'll come like a shot."

"That's kind," said Biddy, dropping her hands and now resting her eyes on him gratefully. She remained in this position as if under a charm; then she jerked herself back to her work with the remark: "Florence will like that immensely."

"I'm delighted to please Florence — your description of her's so attractive!" Sherringham laughed. And when his companion asked him if he minded there not being a great feast, because when her mother went away she allowed her a fixed amount for that sort of thing and, as he might imagine, it was n't millions — when Biddy, with the frankness of their pleasant kinship, touched anxiously on this economic point (illustrating, as Peter saw, the lucidity with which Lady Agnes had had in her old age to learn to recognise the occasions when she could be conveniently frugal) he answered that the shortest dinners were the best, especially when one was going to the theatre. That was his case to-night, and did Biddy think he might look to Miss Tressilian to go with them? They'd have to dine early — he wanted not to miss a moment.

"The theatre — Miss Tressilian?" she stared, interrupted and in suspense again.

"Would it incommode you very much to dine say at 7.15 and accept a place in my box? The finger of Providence was in it when I took a box an hour ago. I particularly like your being free to go — if you are free."

She began almost to rave with pleasure. "Dear Peter, how good you are! They'll have it at any hour. Florence will be so glad."

"And has Florence seen Miss Rooth?"

"Miss Rooth?" the girl repeated, redder than before. He felt on the spot that she had heard of the expenditure of his time and attention on that young lady. It was as if she were conscious of how conscious he would himself be in speaking of her, and there was a sweetness in her allowance for him on that score. But Biddy was more confused for him than he was for himself. He guessed in a moment how much she had thought over what she had heard; this was indicated by her saying vaguely "No, no, I've not seen her." Then she knew she was answering a question he had n't asked her, and she went on: "We shall be too delighted. I saw her — perhaps you remember — in your rooms in Paris. I thought her so wonderful then! Every one's talking of her here. But we don't go to the theatre much, you know: we don't have boxes offered us except when *you* come. Poor Nick's too much taken up in the evening. I've wanted awfully to see her. They say she's magnificent."

"I don't know," Peter was glad to be able honestly to answer. "I have n't seen her."

"You have n't seen her?"

"Never, Biddy. I mean on the stage. In private often — yes," he conscientiously added.

"Oh!" Biddy exclaimed bending her face on Nick's bust again. She asked him no question about the new star, and he offered her no further informa-

tion. There were things in his mind pulling him different ways, so that for some minutes silence was the result of the conflict. At last he said, after an hesitation caused by the possibility that she was ignorant of the fact he had lately elicited from Julia, though it was more probable she might have learned it from the same source:

"Am I perhaps indiscreet in alluding to the circumstance that Nick has been painting Miss Rooth's portrait?"

"You're not indiscreet in alluding to it to me, because I know it."

"Then there's no secret nor mystery about it?"

Biddy just considered. "I don't think mamma knows it."

"You mean you've been keeping it from her because she would n't like it?"

"We're afraid she may think papa would n't have liked it."

This was said with an absence of humour at which Peter could but show amusement, though he quickly recovered himself, repenting of any apparent failure of respect to the high memory of his late celebrated relative. He threw off rather vaguely: "Ah yes, I remember that great man's ideas," and then went on: "May I ask if you know it, the fact we're talking of, through Julia or through Nick?"

"I know it from both of them."

"Then if you're in their confidence may I further ask if this undertaking of Nick's is the reason why things seem to be at an end between them?"

"Oh I don't think she likes it," Biddy had to say.

"Is n't it good?"

"Oh I don't mean the picture — she has n't seen it. But his having done it."

"Does she dislike it so much that that's why she won't marry him?"

Biddy gave up her work, moving away from it to look at it. She came and sat down on the long bench on which Sherringham had placed himself. Then she broke out: "Oh Peter, it's a great trouble — it's a very great trouble; and I can't tell you, for I don't understand it."

"If I ask you," he said, "it's not to pry into what does n't concern me; but Julia's my sister, and I can't after all help taking some interest in her life. She tells me herself so little. She does n't think me worthy."

"Ah poor Julia!" Biddy wailed defensively. Her tone recalled to him that Julia had at least thought him worthy to unite himself to Bridget Dormer, and inevitably betrayed that the girl was thinking of that also. While they both thought of it they sat looking into each other's eyes.

"Nick, I'm sure, does n't treat *you* that way; I'm sure he confides in you; he talks to you about his occupations, his ambitions," Peter continued. "And you understand him, you enter into them, you're nice to him, you help him."

"Oh Nick's life — it's very dear to me," Biddy granted.

"That must be jolly for him."

"It makes *me* very happy."

Peter uttered a low ambiguous groan; then he

cried with irritation: "What the deuce is the matter with them then? Why can't they hit it off together and be quiet and rational and do what every one wants them to?"

"Oh Peter, it's awfully complicated!" the girl sighed with sagacity.

"Do you mean that Nick's in love with her?"

"In love with Julia?"

"No, no, with Miriam Rooth."

She shook her head slowly, then with a smile which struck him as one of the sweetest things he had ever seen — it conveyed, at the expense of her own prospects, such a shy, generous little mercy of reassurance — "He is n't, Peter," she brought out. "Julia thinks it trifling — all that sort of thing," she added. "She wants him to go in for different honours."

"Julia's the oddest woman. I mean I thought she loved him," Peter explained. "And when you love a person —!" He continued to make it out, leaving his sentence impatiently unfinished, while Biddy, with lowered eyes, sat waiting — it so interested her — to learn what you did when you loved a person. "I can't conceive her giving him up. He has great ability, besides being such a good fellow."

"It's for his happiness, Peter — that's the way she reasons," Biddy set forth. "She does it for an idea; she has told me a great deal about it, and I see the way she feels."

"You try to, Biddy, because you're such a dear good-natured girl, but I don't believe you do in the least," he took the liberty of replying. "It's too little

the way you yourself would feel. Julia's idea, as you call it, must be curious."

"Well, it is, Peter," Biddy mournfully admitted. "She won't risk not coming out at the top."

"At the top of what?"

"Oh of everything." Her tone showed a trace of awe of such high views.

"Surely one's at the top of everything when one's in love."

"I don't know," said the girl.

"Do you doubt it?" Peter asked.

"I've never been in love and I never shall be."

"You're as perverse, in your way, as Julia," he returned to this. "But I confess I don't understand Nick's attitude any better. He seems to me, if I may say so, neither fish nor flesh."

"Oh his attitude's very noble, Peter; his state of mind's wonderfully interesting," Biddy pleaded. "Surely *you* must be in favour of art," she beautifully said.

It made him look at her a moment. "Dear Biddy, your little digs are as soft as zephyrs."

She coloured, but she protested. "My little digs? What do you mean? Are n't you in favour of art?"

"The question's delightfully simple. I don't know what you're talking about. Everything has its place. A parliamentary life," he opined, "scarce seems to me the situation for portrait-painting."

"That's just what Nick says."

"You talk of it together a great deal?"

"Yes, Nick's very good to me."

"Clever Nick! And what do you advise him?"

"Oh to *do* something."

"That's valuable," Peter laughed. "Not to give up his sweetheart for the sake of a paint-pot, I hope?"

"Never, never, Peter! It's not a question of his giving up," Biddy pursued, "for Julia has herself shaken free. I think she never really felt safe — she loved him, but was afraid of him. Now she's only afraid — she has lost the confidence she tried to have. Nick has tried to hold her, but she has wrested herself away. Do you know what she said to me? She said 'My confidence has gone for ever.'"

"I did n't know she was such a prig!" Julia's brother commented. "They're queer people, verily, with water in their veins instead of blood. You and I would n't be like that, should we? — though you *have* taken up such a discouraging position about caring for a fellow."

"I care for art," poor Biddy returned.

"You do, to some purpose" — and Peter glanced at the bust.

"To that of making you laugh at me."

But this he did n't heed. "Would you give a good man up for 'art'?"

"A good man? What man?"

"Well, say me — if I wanted to marry you."

She had the briefest of pauses. "Of course I would — in a moment. At any rate I'd give up the House of Commons," she amended. "That's what Nick's going to do now — only you must n't tell any one."

Peter wondered. "He's going to chuck up his seat?"

"I think his mind is made up to it. He has talked

me over—we've had some deep discussions. Yes, I'm on the side of art!" she ardently said.

"Do you mean in order to paint — to paint that girl?" Peter went on.

"To paint every one — that's what he wants. By keeping his seat he has n't kept Julia, and she was the thing he cared for most in public life. When he has got out of the whole thing his attitude, as he says, will be at least clear. He's tremendously interesting about it, Peter," Biddy declared; "has talked to me wonderfully—has won me over. Mamma's heart-broken; telling *her* will be the hardest part."

"If she does n't know," he asked, "why then is she heart-broken?"

"Oh at the hitch about their marriage — she knows that. Their marriage has been so what she wanted. She thought it perfection. She blames Nick fearfully. She thinks he held the whole thing in his hand and that he has thrown away a magnificent opportunity."

"And what does Nick say to her?"

"He says 'Dear old mummy!'"

"That's good," Peter pronounced.

"I don't know what will become of her when this other blow arrives," Biddy went on. "Poor Nick wants to please her — he does, he does. But, as he says, you can't please every one and you must before you die please yourself a little."

Nick's kinsman, whose brother-in-law he was to have been, sat looking at the floor; the colour had risen to his face while he listened. Then he sprang up and took another turn about the room. His companion's

artless but vivid recital had set his blood in motion. He had taken Nick's political prospects very much for granted, thought of them as definite and almost dazzling. To learn there was something for which he was ready to renounce such honours, and to recognise the nature of that bribe, affected our young man powerfully and strangely. He felt as if he had heard the sudden blare of a trumpet, yet felt at the same time as if he had received a sudden slap in the face. Nick's bribe was "art" — the strange temptress with whom he himself had been wrestling and over whom he had finally ventured to believe that wisdom and training had won a victory. There was something in the conduct of his old friend and playfellow that made all his reasonings small. So unexpected, so courageous a choice moved him as a reproach and a challenge. He felt ashamed of having placed himself so unromantically on his guard, and rapidly said to himself that if Nick could afford to allow so much for "art" he might surely exhibit some of the same confidence. There had never been the least avowed competition between the cousins — their lines lay too far apart for that; but they nevertheless rode their course in sight of each other, and Peter had now the impression of suddenly seeing Nick Dormer give his horse the spur, bound forward and fly over a wall. He was put on his mettle and had n't to look long to spy an obstacle he too might ride at. High rose his curiosity to see what warrant his kinsman might have for such risks — how he was mounted for such exploits. He really knew little about Nick's talent — so little as to feel no right to exclaim "What an ass!" when

Biddy mentioned the fact which the existence of real talent alone could redeem from absurdity. All his eagerness to see what Nick had been able to make of such a subject as Miriam Rooth came back to him: though it was what mainly had brought him to Rosedale Road he had forgotten it in the happy accident of his encounter with the girl. He was conscious that if the surprise of a revelation of power were in store for him Nick would be justified more than he himself would feel reinstated in self-respect; since the courage of renouncing the forum for the studio hovered before him as greater than the courage of marrying an actress whom one was in love with: the reward was in the latter case so much more immediate. Peter at any rate asked Biddy what Nick had done with his portrait of Miriam. He had n't seen it anywhere in rummaging about the room.

"I think it's here somewhere, but I don't know," she replied, getting up to look vaguely round her.

"Have n't you seen it? Has n't he shown it to you?"

She rested her eyes on him strangely a moment, then turned them away with a mechanical air of still searching. "I think it's in the room, put away with its face to the wall."

"One of those dozen canvases with their backs to us?"

"One of those perhaps."

"Have n't you tried to see?"

"I have n't touched them" — and Biddy had a colour.

"Has n't Nick had it out to show you?"

"He says it's in too bad a state — it is n't finished — it won't do."

"And have n't you had the curiosity to turn it round for yourself?"

The embarrassed look in her face deepened under his insistence and it seemed to him that her eyes pleaded with him a moment almost to tears. "I've had an idea he would n't like it."

Her visitor's own desire, however, had become too sharp for easy forbearance. He laid his hand on two or three canvases which proved, as he extricated them, to be either blank or covered with rudimentary forms. "Dear Biddy, have you such intense delicacy?" he asked, pulling out something else.

The enquiry was meant in familiar kindness, for Peter was struck even to admiration with her having a sense of honour that all girls have n't. She must in this particular case have longed for a sight of Nick's work — the work that had brought about such a crisis in his life. But she had passed hours in his studio alone without permitting herself a stolen peep; she was capable of that if she believed it would please him. Peter liked a charming girl's being capable of that — he had known charming girls who would n't in the least have been — and his question was really a form of homage. Biddy, however, apparently discovered some light mockery in it, and she broke out incongruously:

"I have n't wanted so much to see it! I don't care for her so much as that!"

"So much as what?" He could n't but wonder.

"I don't care for his actress — for that vulgar

creature. I don't like her!" said Biddy almost startlingly.

Peter stared. "I thought you had n't seen her."

"I saw her in Paris — twice. She was wonderfully clever, but she did n't charm me."

He quickly considered, saying then all kindly: "I won't inflict the thing on you in that case — we'll leave it alone for the present." Biddy made no reply to this at first, but after a moment went straight over to the row of stacked canvases and exposed several of them to the light. "Why did you say you wished to go to the theatre to-night?" her companion continued.

Still she was silent; after which, with her back turned to him and a little tremor in her voice while she drew forth successively her brother's studies, she made answer: "For the sake of your company, Peter! Here it is, I think," she added, moving a large canvas with some effort. "No, no, I'll hold it for you. Is that the light?"

She would n't let him take it; she bade him stand off and allow her to place it in the right position. In this position she carefully presented it, supporting it at the proper angle from behind and showing her head and shoulders above it. From the moment his eyes rested on the picture Peter accepted this service without protest. Unfinished, simplified and in some portions merely suggested, it was strong, vivid and assured, it had already the look of life and the promise of power. Peter felt all this and was startled, was strangely affected — he had no idea Nick moved with that stride. Miriam, seated, was represented in three quarters, almost to her feet. She leaned for-

ward with one of her legs crossed over the other, her arms extended and foreshortened, her hands locked together round her knee. Her beautiful head was bent a little, broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life. She had a grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, a survey from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all the figures and passions he may represent. Peter asked himself where his kinsman had learned to paint like that. He almost gasped at the composition of the thing and at the drawing of the difficult arms. Biddy abstained from looking round the corner of the canvas as she held it; she only watched, in Peter's eyes, for this gentleman's impression of it. That she easily caught, and he measured her impression — her impression of *his* impression — when he went after a few minutes to relieve her. She let him lift the thing out of her grasp; he moved it and rested it, so that they could still see it, against the high back of a chair. "It's tremendously good," he then handsomely pronounced.

"Dear dear Nick," Biddy murmured, looking at it now.

"Poor poor Julia!" Peter was prompted to exclaim in a different tone. His companion made no rejoinder to this, and they stood another minute or two side by side and in silence, gazing at the portrait. At last he took up his hat — he had no more time, he must go. "Will you come to-night all the same?" he asked with a laugh that was somewhat awkward and an offer of a hand-shake.

"All the same?" Biddy seemed to wonder.

"Why you say she's a terrible creature," Peter completed with his eyes on the painted face.

"Oh anything for art!" Biddy smiled.

"Well, at seven o'clock then." And Sherringham departed, leaving the girl alone with the Tragic Muse and feeling with a quickened rush the beauty of that young woman as well as, all freshly, the peculiar possibilities of Nick.

XXX

It was not till after the noon of the next day that he was to see Miriam Rooth. He wrote her a note that evening, to be delivered to her at the theatre, and during the performance she sent round to him a card with "All right, come to luncheon to-morrow" scrawled on it in pencil.

When he presented himself at Balaklava Place he learned that the two ladies had not come in — they had gone again early to rehearsal; but they had left word that he was to be pleased to wait, they would appear from one moment to the other. It was further mentioned to him, as he was ushered into the drawing-room, that Mr. Dashwood was in possession of that ground. This circumstance, however, Peter barely noted: he had been soaring so high for the past twelve hours that he had almost lost consciousness of the minor differences of earthly things. He had taken Biddy Dormer and her friend Miss Tressilian home from the play and after leaving them had walked about the streets, had roamed back to his sister's house, in a state of exaltation the intenser from his having for the previous time contained himself, thinking it more decorous and considerate, less invidious and less blatant, not to "rave." Sitting there in the shade of the box with his companions he had watched Miriam in attentive but inexpressive silence, glowing and vibrating inwardly, yet for these

fine deep reasons not committing himself to the spoken rapture. Delicacy, it appeared to him, should rule the hour; and indeed he had never had a pleasure less alloyed than this little period of still observation and repressed ecstasy. Miriam's art lost nothing by it, and Biddy's mild nearness only gained. This young lady was virtually mute as well — wonderingly, dauntedly, as if she too associated with the performer various other questions than that of her mastery of her art. To this mastery Biddy's attitude was a candid and liberal tribute: the poor girl sat quenched and pale, as if in the blinding light of a comparison by which it would be presumptuous even to be annihilated. Her subjection, however, was a gratified, a charmed subjection: there was beneficence in such beauty — the beauty of the figure that moved before the footlights and spoke in music — even if it deprived one of hope. Peter did n't say to her in vulgar elation and in reference to her whimsical profession of dislike at the studio "Well, do you find our friend so disagreeable now?" and she was grateful to him for his forbearance, for the tacit kindness of which the idea seemed to be: "My poor child, I'd prefer you if I could; but — judge for yourself — how can I? Expect of me only the possible. Expect that certainly, but only that." In the same degree Peter liked Biddy's sweet hushed air of judging for herself, of recognising his discretion and letting him off while she was lost in the illusion, in the convincing picture of the stage. Miss Tressilian did most of the criticism: she broke out cheerfully and sonorously from time to time, in reference to the actress, "Most

striking certainly" or "She *is* clever, is n't she?" She uttered a series of propositions to which her companions found it impossible to respond. Miss Tressilian was disappointed in nothing but their enjoyment: they did n't seem to think the exhibition as amusing as she.

Walking away through the ordered void of Lady Agnes's quarter, with the four acts of the play glowing again before him in the smokeless London night, Peter found the liveliest thing in his impression the certitude that if he had never seen Miriam before and she had had for him none of the advantages of association, he would still have recognised in her performance the richest interest the theatre had ever offered him. He floated in the felicity of it, in the general encouragement of a sense of the perfectly *done*, in the almost aggressive bravery of still larger claims for an art which could so triumphantly, so exquisitely render life. "Render it?" he said to himself. "Create it and reveal it, rather; give us something new and large and of the first order!" He had *seen* Miriam now; he had never seen her before; he had never seen her till he saw her in her conditions. Oh her conditions — there were many things to be said about them; they were paltry enough as yet, inferior, inadequate, obstructive, as compared with the right full finished setting of such a talent; but the essence of them was now, irremoveably, in our young man's eyes, the vision of how the uplifted stage and the listening house transformed her. That idea of her having no character of her own came back to him with a force that made him laugh in the empty

street: this was a disadvantage she reduced so to nothing that obviously he had n't known her till to-night. Her character was simply to hold you by the particular spell; any other — the good nature of home, the relation to her mother, her friends, her lovers, her debts, the practice of virtues or industries or vices — was not worth speaking of. These things were the fictions and shadows; the representation was the deep substance.

Peter had as he went an intense vision — he had often had it before — of the conditions still absent, the great and complete ones, those which would give the girl's talent a superior, a discussable stage. More than ever he desired them, mentally invoked them, filled them out in imagination, cheated himself with the idea that they were possible. He saw them in a momentary illusion and confusion: a great academic artistic theatre, subsidised and unburdened with money-getting, rich in its repertory, rich in the high quality and the wide array of its servants, rich above all in the authority of an impossible administrator — a manager personally disinterested, not an actor with an eye to the main chance; pouring forth a continuity of tradition, striving for perfection, laying a splendid literature under contribution. He saw the heroine of a hundred "situations," variously dramatic and vividly real; he saw comedy and drama and passion and character and English life; he saw all humanity and history and poetry, and then perpetually, in the midst of them, shining out in the high relief of some great moment, an image as fresh as an unveiled statue. He was not unconscious that he was taking all sorts

of impossibilities and miracles for granted; but he was under the conviction, for the time, that the woman he had been watching three hours, the incarnation of the serious drama, would be a new and vivifying force. The world was just then so bright to him that even Basil Dashwood struck him at first as a conceivable agent of his dream.

It must be added that before Miriam arrived the breeze that filled Sherringham's sail began to sink a little. He passed out of the eminently "let" drawing-room, where twenty large photographs of the young actress bloomed in the desert; he went into the garden by a glass door that stood open, and found Mr. Dashwood lolling on a bench and smoking cigarettes. This young man's conversation was a different music — it took him down, as he felt; showed him, very sensibly and intelligibly, it must be confessed, the actual theatre, the one they were all concerned with, the one they would have to make the miserable best of. It was fortunate that he kept his intoxication mainly to himself: the Englishman's habit of not being effusive still prevailed with him after his years of exposure to the foreign infection. Nothing could have been less exclamatory than the meeting of the two men, with its question or two, its remark or two, about the new visitor's arrival in London; its offhand "I noticed you last night, I was glad you turned up at last" on one side and its attenuated "Oh yes, it was the first time; I was very much interested" on the other. Basil Dashwood played a part in "Yolande" and Peter had not failed to take with some comfort the measure of his aptitude. He judged it to

be of the small order, as indeed the part, which was neither that of the virtuous nor that of the villainous hero, restricted him to two or three inconspicuous effects and three or four changes of dress. He represented an ardent but respectful young lover whom the distracted heroine found time to pity a little and even to rail at; but it was impressed upon his critic that he scarcely represented young love. He looked very well, but Peter had heard him already in a hundred contemporary pieces; he never got out of rehearsal. He uttered sentiments and breathed vows with a nice voice, with a shy boyish tremor, but as if he were afraid of being chaffed for it afterwards; giving the spectator in the stalls the sense of holding the prompt-book and listening to a recitation. He made one think of country-houses and lawn-tennis and private theatricals; than which there could n't be, to Peter's mind, a range of association more disconnected from the actor's art.

Dashwood knew all about the new thing, the piece in rehearsal; he knew all about everything — receipts and salaries and expenses and newspaper-articles, and what old Baskerville said and what Mrs. Ruffler thought: matters of superficial concern to his fellow guest, who wondered, before they had sight of Miriam, if she talked with her "walking-gentleman" about them by the hour, deep in them and finding them not vulgar and boring but the natural air of her life and the essence of her profession. Of course she did — she naturally would; it was all in the day's work and he might feel sure she would n't turn up her nose at the shop. He had to remind himself that he

did n't care if she did n't, that he would really think worse of her if she should. She certainly was in deep with her bland playmate, talking shop by the hour: he could see this from the fellow's ease of attitude, the air of a man at home and doing the honours. He divined a great intimacy between the two young artists, but asked himself at the same time what he, Peter Sherringham, had to say about it. He did n't pretend to control Miriam's intimacies, it was to be supposed; and if he had encouraged her to adopt a profession rich in opportunities for comradeship it was not for him to cry out because she had taken to it kindly. He had already descried a fund of utility in Mrs. Lovick's light brother; but it irritated him, all the same, after a while, to hear the youth represent himself as almost indispensable. He was practical — there was no doubt of that; and this idea added to Peter's paradoxical sense that as regards the matters actually in question he himself had not this virtue. Dashwood had got Mrs. Rooth the house; it happened by a lucky chance that Laura Lumley, to whom it belonged — Sherringham would know Laura Lumley? — wanted to get rid, for a mere song, of the remainder of the lease. She was going to Australia with a troupe of her own. They just stepped into it; it was good air — the best sort of London air to live in, to sleep in, for people of their trade. Peter came back to his wonder at what Miriam's personal relations with this deucedly knowing gentleman might be, and was again able to assure himself that they might be anything in the world she liked, for any stake he, the familiar of the Foreign Office, had in them.

Dashwood told him of all the smart people who had tried to take up the new star — the way the London world had already held out its hand; and perhaps it was Sherringham's irritation, the crushed sentiment I just mentioned, that gave a little heave in the exclamation "Oh that — that's all rubbish: the less of that the better!" At this Mr. Dashwood sniffed a little, rather resentful, he had expected Peter to be pleased with the names of the eager ladies who had "called" — which proved how low a view he took of his art. Our friend explained — it is to be hoped not pedantically — that this art was serious work and that society was humbug and imbecility; also that of old the great comedians would n't have known such people. Garrick had essentially his own circle.

"No, I suppose they did n't 'call' in the old narrow-minded time," said Basil Dashwood.

"Your profession did n't call. They had better company — that of the romantic gallant characters they represented. They lived with *them*, so it was better all round." And Peter asked himself — for that clearly struck the young man as a dreary period — if *he* only, for Miriam, in her new life and among the futilities of those who tried to lionise her, expressed the artistic idea. This at least, Sherringham reflected, was a situation that could be improved.

He learned from his companion that the new play, the thing they were rehearsing, was an old play, a romantic drama of thirty years before, very frequently revived and threadbare with honourable service. Dashwood had a part in it, but there was an act in which he did n't appear, and this was the act they were doing

that morning. "Yolande" had done all "Yolande" could do: the visitor was mistaken if he supposed "Yolande" such a tremendous hit. It had done very well, it had run three months, but they were by no means coining money with it. It would n't take them to the end of the season; they had seen for a month past that they would have to put on something else. Miss Rooth moreover wanted a new part; she was above all impatient to show her big range. She had grand ideas; she thought herself very good-natured to repeat the same stuff for three months. The young man lighted another cigarette and described to his listener some of Miss Rooth's ideas. He abounded in information about her — about her character, her temper, her peculiarities, her little ways, her manner of producing some of her effects. He spoke with familiarity and confidence, as if knowing more about her than any one else — as if he had invented or discovered her, were in a sense her proprietor or guarantor. It was the talk of the shop, both with a native sharpness and a touching young candour; the expansion of the commercial spirit when it relaxes and generalises, is conscious of safety with another member of the guild.

Peter at any rate could n't help protesting against the lame old war-horse it was proposed to bring into action, who had been ridden to death and had saved a thousand desperate fields; and he exclaimed on the strange passion of the good British public for sitting again and again through expected situations, watching for speeches they had heard and surprises that struck the hour. Dashwood defended the taste of

London, praised it as loyal, constant, faithful; to which his interlocutor retorted with some vivacity that it was faithful to sad trash. He justified this sally by declaring the play in rehearsal sad trash, clumsy mediocrity with all its convenience gone, and that the fault was the want of life in the critical sense of the public, which was ignobly docile, opening its mouth for its dose like the pupils of Dotheboys Hall; not insisting on something different, on a fresh brew altogether. Dashwood asked him if he then wished their friend to go on playing for ever a part she had repeated more than eighty nights on end: he thought the modern "run" was just what he had heard him denounce in Paris as the disease the theatre was dying of. This imputation Peter quite denied, wanting to know if she could n't change to something less stale than the greatest staleness of all. Dashwood opined that Miss Rooth must have a strong part and that there happened to be one for her in the before-mentioned venerable novelty. She had to take what she could get — she was n't a person to cry for the moon. This was a stop-gap — she would try other things later; she would have to look round her; you could n't have a new piece, one that would do, left at your door every day with the milk. On one point Sherringham's mind might be at rest: Miss Rooth was a woman who would do every blessed thing there was to do. Give her time and she would walk straight through the repertory. She was a woman who would do this — she was a woman who would do that: her spokesman employed this phrase so often that Peter, nervous, got up and threw an unsmoked

cigarette away. Of course she was a woman; there was no need of his saying it a hundred times.

As for the repertory, the young man went on, the most beautiful girl in the world could give but what she had. He explained, after their visitor sat down again, that the noise made by Miss Rooth was not exactly what this admirer appeared to suppose. Sherringham had seen the house the night before and would recognise that, though good, it was very far from great. She had done very well, it was all right, but she had never gone above a point which Dashwood expressed in pounds sterling, to the edification of his companion, who vaguely thought the figure high. Peter remembered that he had been unable to get a stall, but Dashwood insisted that "Miriam" had not leaped into commanding fame: that was a thing that never happened in fact — it happened only in grotesque works of fiction. She had attracted notice, unusual notice for a woman whose name, the day before, had never been heard of: she was recognised as having, for a novice, extraordinary cleverness and confidence — in addition to her looks, of course, which were the thing that had really fetched the crowd. But she had n't been the talk of London; she had only been the talk of Gabriel Nash. He was n't London, more was the pity. He knew the æsthetic people — the worldly semi-smart ones, not the frumpy sickly lot who wore dirty drapery; and the æsthetic people had run after her. Mr. Dashwood sketchily instructed the pilgrim from Paris as to the different sects in the great religion of beauty, and was able to give him the particular "note" of the critical

clique to which Miriam had begun so quickly to owe it that she had a vogue. The information made our friend feel very ignorant of the world, very uninitiated and buried in his little professional hole. Dashwood warned him that it would be a long time before the general public would wake up to Miss Rooth, even after she had waked up to herself; she would have to do some really big thing first. *They* knew it was in her, the big thing — Peter and he and even poor Nash — because they had seen her as no one else had; but London never took any one on trust — it had to be cash down. It would take their young lady two or three years to pay out her cash and get her equivalent. But of course the equivalent would be simply a gold-mine. Within its limits, however, certainly, the mark she had made was already quite a fairy-tale: there was magic in the way she had concealed from the first her want of experience. She absolutely made you think she had a lot of it, more than any one else. Mr. Dashwood repeated several times that she was a cool hand — a deucedly cool hand, and that he watched her himself, saw ideas come to her, saw her have different notions, and more or less put them to the test, on different nights. She was always alive — she liked it herself. She gave *him* ideas, long as he had been on the stage. Naturally she had a great deal to learn, no end even of quite basic things; a cosmopolite like Sherringham would understand that a girl of that age, who had never had a friend but her mother — her mother was greater fun than ever now — naturally *would* have. Sherringham winced at being dubbed a "cosmopolite" by his young entertainer,

just as he had winced a moment before at hearing himself lumped in esoteric knowledge with Dashwood and Gabriel Nash; but the former of these gentlemen took no account of his sensibility while he enumerated a few of the elements of the "basic." He was a mixture of acuteness and innocent fatuity; and Peter had to recognise in him a rudiment or two of criticism when he said that the wonderful thing in the girl was that she learned so fast — learned something every night, learned from the same old piece a lot more than any one else would have learned from twenty. "That's what it is to be a genius," Peter concurred. "Genius is only the art of getting your experience fast, of stealing it, as it were; and in this sense Miss Rooth's a regular brigand." Dashwood condoned the subtlety and added less analytically "Oh she'll do!" It was exactly in these simple words, addressed to her, that her other admirer had phrased the same truth; yet he did n't enjoy hearing them on his neighbour's lips: they had a profane patronising sound and suggested displeasing equalities.

The two men sat in silence for some minutes, watching a fat robin hop about on the little seedy lawn; at the end of which they heard a vehicle stop on the other side of the garden-wall and the voices of occupants alighting. "Here they come, the dear creatures," said Basil Dashwood without moving; and from where they sat Peter saw the small door in the wall pushed open. The dear creatures were three in number, for a gentleman had added himself to Mrs. Rooth and her daughter. As soon as Miriam's eyes took in her Parisian friend she fell into a large droll

theatrical attitude and, seizing her mother's arm, exclaimed passionately: "Look where he sits, the author of all my woes — cold, cynical, cruel!" She was evidently in the highest spirits; of which Mrs. Rooth partook as she cried indulgently, giving her a slap, "Oh get along, you gypsy!"

"She's always up to something," Dashwood laughed as Miriam, radiant and with a conscious stage tread, glided toward Sherringham as if she were coming to the footlights. He rose slowly from his seat, looking at her and struck with her beauty: he had been impatient to see her, yet in the act his impatience had had a disconcerting check.

He had had time to note that the man who had come in with her was Gabriel Nash, and this recognition brought a low sigh to his lips as he held out his hand to her — a sigh expressive of the sudden sense that his interest in her now could only be a gross community. Of course that did n't matter, since he had set it, at the most, such rigid limits; but he none the less felt vividly reminded that it would be public and notorious, that inferior people would be inveterately mixed up with it, that she had crossed the line and sold herself to the vulgar, making him indeed only one of an equalised multitude. The way Nash turned up there just when he did n't want to see him proved how complicated a thing it was to have a friendship with a young woman so clearly booked for renown. He quite forgot that the intruder had had this object of interest long before his own first view of it and had been present at that passage, which he had in a measure brought about. Had Sherringham not been so

cut out to make trouble of this particular joy he might have found some adequate assurance that their young hostess distinguished him in the way in which, taking his hand in both of hers, she looked up at him and murmured "Dear old master!" Then as if this were not acknowledgement enough she raised her head still higher and, whimsically, gratefully, charmingly, almost nobly, kissed him on the lips before the other men, before the good mother whose "Oh you honest creature!" made everything regular.

XXXI

If he was ruffled by some of her conditions there was thus comfort and consolation to be drawn from others, beside the essential fascination — so small the doubt of that now — of the young lady's own society. He spent the afternoon, they all spent the afternoon, and the occasion reminded him of pages in "Wilhelm Meister." He himself could pass for Wilhelm, and if Mrs. Rooth had little resemblance to Mignon Miriam was remarkably like Philina. The moveable feast awaiting them — luncheon, tea, dinner? — was delayed two or three hours; but the interval was a source of gaiety, for they all smoked cigarettes in the garden and Miriam gave striking illustrations of the parts she was studying. Peter was in the state of a man whose toothache has suddenly stopped — he was exhilarated by the cessation of pain. The pain had been the effort to remain in Paris after the creature in the world in whom he was most interested had gone to London, and the balm of seeing her now was the measure of the previous soreness.

Gabriel Nash had, as usual, plenty to say, and he talked of Nick's picture so long that Peter wondered if he did it on purpose to vex him. They went in and out of the house; they made excursions to see what form the vague meal was taking; and Sherringham got half an hour alone, or virtually alone, with the mistress of his unsanctioned passion — drawing her

publicly away from the others and making her sit with him in the most sequestered part of the little gravelled grounds. There was summer enough in the trees to shut out the adjacent villas, and Basil Dashwood and Gabriel Nash lounged together at a convenient distance while Nick's whimsical friend dropped polished pebbles, sometimes audibly splashing, into the deep well of the histrionic simplicity. Miriam confessed that like all comedians they ate at queer hours; she sent Dashwood in for biscuits and sherry — she proposed sending him round to the grocer's in the Circus Road for superior wine. Peter judged him the factotum of the little household: he knew where the biscuits were kept and the state of the grocer's account. When he himself congratulated her on having so useful an inmate she said genially, but as if the words disposed of him, "Oh he's awfully handy." To this she added "You're not, you know"; resting the kindest, most pitying eyes on him. The sensation they gave him was as sweet as if she had stroked his cheek, and her manner was responsive even to tenderness. She called him "Dear master" again and again, and still oftener "Cher maître," and appeared to express gratitude and reverence by every intonation.

"You're doing the humble dependent now," he said: "you do it beautifully, as you do everything." She replied that she did n't make it humble enough — she could n't; she was too proud, too insolent in her triumph. She liked that, the triumph, too much, and she did n't mind telling him she was perfectly happy. Of course as yet the triumph was very limited; but

success was success, whatever its quantity; the dish was a small one but had the right taste. Her imagination had already bounded beyond the first phase, unexpectedly great as this had been: her position struck her as modest compared with the probable future now vivid to her. Peter had never seen her so soft and sympathetic; she had insisted in Paris that her personal character was that of the good girl — she used the term in a fine loose way — and it was impossible to be a better girl than she showed herself this pleasant afternoon. She was full of gossip and anecdote and drollery; she had exactly the air he would have wished her to have — that of thinking of no end of things to tell him. It was as if she had just returned from a long journey and had had strange adventures and made wonderful discoveries. She began to speak of this and that, then broke off to speak of something else; she talked of the theatre, of the "critics" and above all of London, of the people she had met and the extraordinary things they said to her, of the parts she was going to take up, of lots of new ideas that had come to her about the art of comedy. She wanted to do comedy now — to do the comedy of London life. She was delighted to find that seeing more of the world suggested things to her; they came straight from the fact, from nature, if you could call it nature; she was thus convinced more than ever that the artist ought to *live* so as to get on with his business, gathering ideas and lights from experience — ought to welcome any experience that would give him lights. But work of course *was* experience, and everything in one's life that was

good was work. That was the jolly thing in the actor's trade — it made up for other elements that were odious: if you only kept your eyes open nothing could happen to you that would n't be food for observation and grist to your mill, showing you how people looked and moved and spoke, cried and grimaced, writhed and dissimulated, in given situations. She saw all round her things she wanted to "do" — London bristled with them if you had eyes to see. She was fierce to know why people did n't take them up, put them into plays and parts, give one a chance with them; she expressed her sharp impatience of the general literary *bêtise*. She had never been chary of this particular displeasure, and there were moments — it was an old story and a subject of frank raillery to Sherringham — when to hear her you might have thought there was no cleverness anywhere but in her own splendid impatience. She wanted tremendous things done that she might use them, but she did n't pretend to say exactly what they were to be, nor even approximately how they were to be handled: her ground was rather that if *she* only had a pen — it was exasperating to have to explain! She mainly contented herself with the view that nothing had really been touched: she felt that more and more as she saw more of people's goings-on.

Peter went to her theatre again that evening and indeed made no scruple of going every night for a week. Rather perhaps I should say he made a scruple, but a high part of the pleasure of his life during these arbitrary days was to overcome it. The only way to prove he could overcome it was to go; and he was

satisfied, after he had been seven times, not only with the spectacle on the stage but with his perfect independence. He knew no satiety, however, with the spectacle on the stage, which induced for him but a further curiosity. Miriam's performance was a thing alive, with a power to change, to grow, to develop, to beget new forms of the same life. Peter contributed to it in his amateurish way and watched with solicitude the effect of his care and the fortune of his hints. He talked it over in Balaklava Place, suggested modifications and variations worth trying. She professed herself thankful for any refreshment that could be administered to her interest in "Yolande," and with an energy that showed large resource touched up her part and drew several new airs from it. Peter's liberties bore on her way of uttering certain speeches, the intonations that would have more beauty or make the words mean more. She had her ideas, or rather she had her instincts, which she defended and illustrated, with a vividness superior to argument, by a happy pictorial phrase or a snatch of mimicry; but she was always for trying; she liked experiments and caught at them, and she was especially thankful when some one gave her a showy reason, a plausible formula, in a case where she only stood on an intuition. She pretended to despise reasons and to like and dislike at her sovereign pleasure; but she always honoured the exotic gift, so that Sherringham was amused with the liberal way she produced it, as if she had been a naked islander rejoicing in a present of crimson cloth.

Day after day he spent most of his time in her

society, and Miss Laura Lumley's recent habitation became the place in London to which his thoughts and his steps were most attached. He was highly conscious of his not now carrying out that principle of abstention he had brought to such maturity before leaving Paris; but he contented himself with a much cruder justification of this lapse than he would have thought adequate in advance. It consisted simply in the idea that to be identified with the first fresh exploits of a young genius was a delightful experience. What was the harm of it when the genius was real? His main security was thus that his relations with Miriam had been placed under the protection of that idea of approved extravagance. In this department they made a very creditable figure and required much less watching and pruning than when it had been his effort to adjust them to a worldly plan. He had in fine a sense of real wisdom when he pronounced it surely enough that this momentary intellectual participation in the girl's dawning fame was a charming thing. Charming things were not frequent enough in a busy man's life to be kicked out of the way. Balaklava Place, looked at in this philosophic way, became almost idyllic: it gave Peter the pleasantest impression he had ever had of London.

The season happened to be remarkably fine; the temperature was high, but not so high as to keep people from the theatre. Miriam's "business" visibly increased, so that the question of putting on the second play underwent some revision. The girl persisted, showing in her persistence a temper of which Peter

had already caught some sharp gleams. It was plain that through her career she would expect to carry things with a high hand. Her managers and agents would n't find her an easy victim or a calculable force; but the public would adore her, surround her with the popularity that attaches to a good-natured and free-spoken princess, and her comrades would have a kindness for her because she would n't be selfish. They too would, besides representing her body-guard, form in a manner a portion of her affectionate public. This was the way her friend read the signs, liking her whimsical tolerance of some of her vulgar playfellows almost well enough to forgive their presence in Balaklava Place, where they were a sore trial to her mother, who wanted her to multiply her points of contact only with the higher orders. There were hours when Peter seemed to make out that her principal relation to the proper world would be to have within two or three years a grand battle with it resulting in its taking her, should she let it have her at all, absolutely on her own terms: a picture which led our young man to ask himself with a helplessness that was not exempt, as he perfectly knew, from absurdity, what part *he* should find himself playing in such a contest and if it would be reserved to him to be the more ridiculous as a peacemaker or as a heavy backer.

"She might know any one she would, and the only person she appears to take any pleasure in is that dreadful Miss Rover," Mrs. Rooth whimpered to him more than once — leading him thus to recognise in the young lady so designated the principal compli-

cation of Balaklava Place. Miss Rover was a little actress who played at Miriam's theatre, combining with an unusual aptitude for delicate comedy a less exceptional absence of rigour in private life. She was pretty and quick and brave, and had a fineness that Miriam professed herself already in a position to estimate as rare. She had no control of her inclinations, yet sometimes they were wholly laudable, like the devotion she had formed for her beautiful colleague, whom she admired not only as an ornament of the profession but as a being altogether of a more fortunate essence. She had had an idea that real ladies were "nasty," but Miriam was not nasty, and who could gainsay that Miriam was a real lady? The girl justified herself to her patron from Paris, who had found no fault with her; she knew how much her mother feared the proper world would n't come in if they knew that the improper, in the person of pretty Miss Rover, was on the ground. What did she care who came and who did n't, and what was to be gained by receiving half the snobs in London? People would have to take her exactly as they found her — that they would have to learn; and they would be much mistaken if they thought her capable of turning snob too for the sake of their sweet company. She did n't pretend to be anything but what she meant to be, the best general actress of her time; and what had that to do with her seeing or not seeing a poor ignorant girl who had loved — well, she need n't say what Fanny had done. They had met in the way of business; she did n't say she would have run after her. She had liked her because she was n't a stick,

and when Fanny Rover had asked her quite wistfully if she might n't come and see her and like her she had n't bristled with scandalised virtue. Miss Rover was n't a bit more stupid or more ill-natured than any one else; it would be time enough to shut the door when she should become so.

Peter commended even to extravagance the liberality of such comradeship; said that of course a woman did n't go into that profession to see how little she could swallow. She was right to live with the others so long as they were at all possible, and it was for her and only for her to judge how long that might be. This was rather heroic on his part, for his assumed detachment from the girl's personal life still left him a margin for some forms of uneasiness. It would have made in his spirit a great difference for the worse that the woman he loved, and for whom he wished no baser lover than himself, should have embraced the prospect of consorting only with the cheaper kind. It was all very well, but Fanny Rover was simply a rank *cabotine*, and that sort of association was an odd training for a young woman who was to have been good enough — he could n't forget that, but kept remembering it as if it might still have a future use — to be his admired wife. Certainly he ought to have thought of such things before he permitted himself to become so interested in a theatrical nature. His heroism did him service, however, for the hour: it helped him by the end of the week to feel quite broken in to Miriam's little circle. What helped him most indeed was to reflect that she would get tired of a good many of its members herself in time;

for if it was not that they were shocking — very few of them shone with that intense light — they could yet be thoroughly trusted in the long run to bore you.

There was a lovely Sunday in particular, spent by him almost all in Balaklava Place — he arrived so early — when, in the afternoon, every sort of odd person dropped in. Miriam held a reception in the little garden and insisted on all the company's staying to supper. Her mother shed tears to Peter, in the desecrated house, because they had accepted, Miriam and she, an invitation — and in Cromwell Road too — for the evening. Miriam had now decreed they should n't go — they would have so much better fun with their good friends at home. She was sending off a message — it was a terrible distance — by a cabman, and Peter had the privilege of paying the messenger. Basil Dashwood, in another vehicle, proceeded to an hotel known to him, a mile away, for supplementary provisions, and came back with a cold ham and a dozen of champagne. It was all very Bohemian and dishevelled and delightful, very supposedly droll and enviable to outsiders; and Miriam told anecdotes and gave imitations of the people she would have met if she had gone out, so that no one had a sense of loss — the two occasions were fantastically united. Mrs. Rooth drank champagne for consolation, though the consolation was imperfect when she remembered she might have drunk it, though not quite so much perhaps, in Cromwell Road.

Taken in connection with the evening before

the day formed for our friend the most complete exhibition of his young woman he had yet enjoyed. He had been at the theatre, to which the Saturday night happened to have brought the very fullest house she had played to, and he came early to Balaklava Place, to tell her once again — he had told her half a dozen times the evening before — that with the excitement of her biggest audience she had surpassed herself, acted with remarkable intensity. It pleased her to hear this, and the spirit with which she interpreted the signs of the future and, during an hour he spent alone with her, Mrs. Rooth being upstairs and Basil Dashwood luckily absent, treated him to twenty specimens of feigned passion and character, was beyond any natural abundance he had yet seen in a woman. The impression could scarcely have been other if she had been playing wild snatches to him at the piano: the bright updarting flame of her talk rose and fell like an improvisation on the keys. Later, the rest of the day, he could as little miss the good grace with which she fraternised with her visitors, finding always the fair word for each — the key to a common ease, the right turn to keep vanity quiet and make humility brave. It was a wonderful expenditure of generous nervous life. But what he read in it above all was the sense of success in youth, with the future loose and big, and the action of that charm on the faculties. Miriam's limited past had yet pinched her enough to make emancipation sweet, and the emancipation had come at last in an hour. She had stepped into her magic shoes, divined and appropriated everything

they could help her to, become in a day a really original contemporary. He was of course not less conscious of that than Nick Dormer had been when in the cold light of his studio this more detached observer saw too how she had altered.

But the great thing to his mind, and during these first days the irresistible seduction of the theatre, was that she was a rare revelation of beauty. Beauty was the principle of everything she did and of the way she unerringly did it — an exquisite harmony of line and motion and attitude and tone, what was at once most general and most special in her performance. Accidents and instincts played together to this end and constituted something that was independent of her talent or of her merit in a given case, and which as a value to Peter's imagination was far superior to any merit and any talent. He could but call it a felicity and an importance incalculable, and but know that it connected itself with universal values. To see this force in operation, to sit within its radius and feel it shift and revolve and change and never fail, was a corrective to the depression, the humiliation, the bewilderment of life. It transported our troubled friend from the vulgar hour and the ugly fact; drew him to something that had no warrant but its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the remote, the antique. It was what most made him say to himself "Oh hang it, what does it matter?" when he reflected that an *homme sérieux*, as they said in Paris, rather gave himself away, as they said in America, by going every night to the same sordid stall at which all the world might stare. It was what kept

him from doing anything but hover round Miriam —kept him from paying any other visits, from attending to any business, from going back to Calcutta Gardens. It was a spell he shrank intensely from breaking and the cause of a hundred postponements, confusions and absurdities. It put him in a false position altogether, but it made of the crooked little stucco villa in Saint John's Wood a place in the upper air, commanding the prospect; a nest of winged liberties and ironies far aloft above the huddled town. One should live at altitudes when one could — they braced and simplified; and for a happy interval he never touched the earth.

It was not that there were no influences tending at moments to drag him down — an abasement from which he escaped only because he was up so high. We have seen that Basil Dashwood could affect him at times as a chunk of wood tied to his ankle — this through the circumstance that he made Miriam's famous conditions, those of the public exhibition of her genius, seem small and prosaic; so that Peter had to remind himself how much this smallness was perhaps involved in their being at all. She carried his imagination off into infinite spaces, whereas she carried Dashwood's only into the box-office and the revival of plays that were barbarously bad. The worst was its being so open to him to see that a sharp young man really in the business might know better than he. Another vessel of superior knowledge— he talked, that is, as if he knew better than any one — was Gabriel Nash, who lacked no leisure for hatefully haunting Balaklava Place, or in other words appeared

to enjoy the same command of his time as Peter Sherringham. The pilgrim from Paris regarded him with mingled feelings, for he had not forgotten the contentious character of their first meeting or the degree to which he had been moved to urge upon Nick Dormer's consideration that his talkative friend was probably one of the most eminent of asses. This personage turned up now as an admirer of the charming creature he had scoffed at, and there was much to exasperate in the smooth gloss of his inconsistency, at which he never cast an embarrassed glance. He practised indeed such loose licence of regard to every question that it was difficult, in vulgar parlance, to "have" him; his sympathies hummed about like bees in a garden, with no visible plan, no economy in their flight. He thought meanly of the modern theatre and yet had discovered a fund of satisfaction in the most promising of its exponents; and Peter could more than once but say to him that he should really, to keep his opinions at all in hand, attach more value to the stage or less to the interesting actress. Miriam took her perfect ease at his expense and treated him as the most abject of her slaves: all of which was worth seeing as an exhibition, on Nash's part, of the beautifully imperturbable. When Peter all too grossly pronounced him "damned" impudent he always felt guilty later on of an injustice—Nash had so little the air of a man with something to gain. He was aware nevertheless of a certain itching in his boot-toe when his fellow visitor brought out, and for the most part to Miriam herself, in answer to any charge of tergiversation, "Oh it 's all right; it's the

voice, you know — the enchanting voice!" Nash meant by this, as indeed he more fully set forth, that he came to the theatre or to the villa simply to treat his ear to the sound — the richest then to be heard on earth, as he maintained — issuing from Miriam's lips. Its richness was quite independent of the words she might pronounce or the poor fable they might subserve, and if the pleasure of hearing her in public was the greater by reason of the larger volume of her utterance it was still highly agreeable to see her at home, for it was there the strictly mimetic gift he freely conceded to her came out most. He spoke as if she had been formed by the bounty of nature to be his particular recreation, and as if, being an expert in innocent joys, he took his pleasure wherever he found it.

He was perpetually in the field, sociable, amiable, communicative, inveterately contradicted but never confounded, ready to talk to any one about anything and making disagreement — of which he left the responsibility wholly to others — a basis of harmony. Every one knew what he thought of the theatrical profession, and yet who could say he did n't regard its members as embodiments of comedy when he touched with such a hand the spring of their foibles? — touched it with an art that made even Peter laugh, notwithstanding his attitude of reserve where this interloper was concerned. At any rate, though he had committed himself as to their general fatuity he put up with their company, for the sake of Miriam's vocal vibrations, with a practical philosophy that was all his own. And she frankly took him for her

supreme, her incorrigible adorer, masquerading as a critic to save his vanity and tolerated for his secret constancy in spite of being a bore. He was meanwhile really not a bore to Peter, who failed of the luxury of being able to regard him as one. He had seen too many strange countries and curious things, observed and explored too much, to be void of illustration. Peter had a sense that if he himself was in the *grandes espaces* Gabriel had probably, as a finer critic, a still wider range. If among Miriam's associates Mr. Dashwood dragged him down, the other main sharer of his privilege challenged him rather to higher and more fantastic flights. If he saw the girl in larger relations than the young actor, who mainly saw her in ill-written parts, Nash went a step further and regarded her, irresponsibly and sublimely, as a priestess of harmony, a figure with which the vulgar ideas of success and failure had nothing to do. He laughed at her "parts," holding that without them she would still be great. Peter envied him his power to content himself with the pleasures he could get; Peter had a shrewd impression that contentment would n't be the final sweetener of his own repast.

Above all Nash held his attention by a constant element of easy reference to Nick Dormer, who, as we know, had suddenly become much more interesting to his kinsman. Peter found food for observation, and in some measure for perplexity, in the relations of all these clever people with each other. He knew why his sister, who had a personal impatience of unapplied ideas, had not been agreeably affected by Miriam's prime patron and had not felt happy

about the attribution of value to "such people" by the man she was to marry. This was a side on which he had no desire to resemble Julia, for he needed no teaching to divine that Nash must have found her accessible to no light — none even about himself. He, Peter, would have been sorry to have to confess he could n't more or less understand him. He understood furthermore that Miriam, in Nick's studio, might very well have appeared to Julia a formidable force. She was younger and would have "seen nothing," but she had quite as much her own resources and was beautiful enough to have made Nick compare her with the lady of Harsh even if he had been in love with that benefactress — a pretension as to which her brother, as we know, entertained doubts.

Peter at all events saw for many days nothing of his cousin, though it might have been said that Nick participated by implication at least in the life of Balaklava Place. Had he given Julia tangible grounds and was his unexpectedly fine rendering of Miriam an act of virtual infidelity? In that case to what degree was the girl to be regarded as an accomplice in his defection, and what was the real nature of Miriam's esteem for her new and (as he might be called) distinguished ally? These questions would have given Peter still more to think about had he not flattered himself he had made up his mind that they concerned Nick and his sitter herself infinitely more than they concerned any one else. That young lady meanwhile was personally before him, so that he had no need to consult for his pleasure his fresh recollection of the

portrait. But he thought of this striking production each time he thought of his so good-looking kinsman's variety of range. And that happened often, for in his hearing Miriam often discussed the happy artist and his possibilities with Gabriel Nash, and Nash broke out about them to all who might hear. Her own tone on the subject was uniform: she kept it on record to a degree slightly irritating that Mr. Dormer had been unforgettably — Peter particularly noted "unforgettably" — kind to her. She never mentioned Julia's irruption to Julia's brother; she only referred to the portrait, with inscrutable amenity, as a direct consequence of this gentleman's fortunate suggestion that first day at Madame Carré's. Nash showed, however, such a disposition to dwell sociably and luminously on the peculiarly interesting character of what he called Dormer's predicament and on the fine suspense it was fitted to kindle in the breast of the truly discerning, that Peter wondered, as I have already hinted, if this insistence were not a subtle perversity, a devilish little invention to torment a man whose jealousy was presumable. Yet his fellow pilgrim struck him as on the whole but scantly devilish and as still less occupied with the prefigurement of so plain a man's emotions. Indeed he threw a glamour of romance over Nick; tossed off toward him such illuminating yet mystifying references that they operated quite as a bait to curiosity, invested with amusement the view of the possible, any wish to follow out the chain of events. He learned from Gabriel that Nick was still away, and he then felt he could almost submit to instruction,

to initiation. The loose charm of these days was troubled, however — it ceased to be idyllic — when late on the evening of the second Sunday he walked away with Nash southward from Saint John's Wood. For then something came out.

BOOK SIXTH

XXXII

It mattered not so much what the doctors thought — and Sir Matthew Hope, the greatest of them all, had been down twice in one week — as that Mr. Chayter, the omniscient butler, declared with all the authority of his position and his experience that Mr. Carteret was very bad indeed. Nick Dormer had a long talk with him — it lasted six minutes — the day he hurried to Beauclere in response to a telegram. It was Mr. Chayter who had taken upon himself to telegraph in spite of the presence in the house of Mr. Carteret's nearest relation and only surviving sister, Mrs. Lendon. This lady, a large mild healthy woman with a heavy tread, a person who preferred early breakfasts, uncomfortable chairs and the advertisement-sheet of the *Times*, had arrived the week before and was awaiting the turn of events. She was a widow and occupied in Cornwall a house nine miles from a station, which had, to make up for this inconvenience as she had once told Nick, a fine old herbaceous garden. She was extremely fond of an herbaceous garden — her main consciousness was of herbaceous possibilities. Nick had often seen her — she had always come to Beauclere once or twice a year. Her sojourn there made no great difference; she was only an "Urania dear" for Mr. Carteret to look across the table at when, on the close of dinner, it was time for her to retire. She

went out of the room always as if it were after some one else; and on the gentlemen's "joining" her later — the junction was not very close — she received them with an air of gratified surprise.

Chayter honoured Nick with a regard which approached, though not improperly competing with it, the affection his master had placed on the same young head, and Chayter knew a good many things. Among them he knew his place; but it was wonderful how little that knowledge had rendered him inaccessible to other kinds. He took upon himself to send for Nick without speaking to Mrs. Lendon, whose influence was now a good deal like that of some large occasional piece of furniture introduced on a contingency. She was one of the solid conveniences that a comfortable house would have, but you could n't talk with a mahogany sofa or a folding screen. Chayter knew how much she had "had" from her brother, and how much her two daughters had each received on marriage; and he was of the opinion that it was quite enough, especially considering the society in which they — you could scarcely call it — moved. He knew beyond this that they would all have more, and that was why he hesitated little about communicating with Nick. If Mrs. Lendon should be ruffled at the intrusion of a young man who neither was the child of a cousin nor had been formally adopted, Chayter was parliamentary enough to see that the forms of debate were observed. He had indeed a slightly compassionate sense that Mrs. Lendon was not easily ruffled. She was always down an extraordinary time before breakfast — Chayter

refused to take it as in the least admonitory — but usually went straight into the garden as if to see that none of the plants had been stolen in the night, and had in the end to be looked for by the footman in some out-of-the-way spot behind the shrubbery, where, plumped upon the ground, she was mostly doing something "rum" to a flower.

Mr. Carteret himself had expressed no wishes. He slept most of the time — his failure at the last had been sudden, but he was rheumatic and seventy-seven — and the situation was in Chayter's hands. Sir Matthew Hope had opined even on a second visit that he would rally and go on, in rudimentary comfort, some time longer; but Chayter took a different and a still more intimate view. Nick was embarrassed: he scarcely knew what he was there for from the moment he could give his good old friend no conscious satisfaction. The doctors, the nurses, the servants, Mrs. Lendon, and above all the settled equilibrium of the square thick house, where an immutable order appeared to slant through the polished windows and tinkle in the quieter bells, all these things represented best the kind of supreme solace to which the master was most accessible.

It was judged best that for the first day Nick should not be introduced into the darkened room. This was the decision of the two decorous nurses, of whom the visitor had had a glimpse and who, with their black uniforms and fresh faces of business, suggested the barmaid emulating the nun. He was depressed and restless, felt himself in a false position and thought it lucky Mrs. Lendon had powers of

placid acceptance. They were old acquaintances: she treated him formally, anxiously, but it was not the rigour of mistrust. It was much more an expression of remote Cornish respect for young abilities and distinguished connexions, inasmuch as she asked him rather yearningly about Lady Agnes and about Lady Flora and Lady Elizabeth. He knew she was kind and ungrudging, and his main regret was for his meagre knowledge and poor responses in regard to his large blank aunts. He sat in the garden with newspapers and looked at the lowered blinds in Mr. Carteret's windows; he wandered round the abbey with cigarettes and lightened his tread and felt grave, wishing everything might be over. He would have liked much to see Mr. Carteret again, but had no desire that Mr. Carteret should see him. In the evening he dined with Mrs. Lendon, and she talked to him at his request and as much as she could about her brother's early years, his beginnings of life. She was so much younger that they appeared to have been rather a tradition of her own youth; but her talk made Nick feel how tremendously different Mr. Carteret had been at that period from what he, Nick, was to-day. He had published at the age of thirty a little volume, thought at the time wonderfully clever, called "The Incidence of Rates"; but Nick had not yet collected the material for any such treatise. After dinner Mrs. Lendon, who was in merciless full dress, retired to the drawing-room, where at the end of ten minutes she was followed by Nick, who had remained behind only because he thought Chayter would expect it. Mrs. Lendon

almost shook hands with him again and then Chayter brought in coffee. Almost in no time afterwards he brought in tea, and the occupants of the drawing-room sat for a slow half-hour, during which the lady looked round at the apartment with a sigh and said: "Don't you think poor Charles had exquisite taste?"

Fortunately the "local man" was at this moment ushered in. He had been upstairs and he smiled himself in with the remark: "It's quite wonderful, quite wonderful." What was wonderful was a marked improvement in the breathing, a distinct indication of revival. The doctor had some tea and chatted for a quarter of an hour in a way that showed what a "good" manner and how large an experience a local man could have. When he retired Nick walked out with him. The doctor's house was near by and he had come on foot. He left the visitor with the assurance that in all probability Mr. Carteret, who was certainly picking up, would be able to see him on the morrow. Our young man turned his steps again to the abbey and took a stroll about it in the starlight. It never looked so huge as when it reared itself into the night, and Nick had never felt more fond of it than on this occasion, more comforted and confirmed by its beauty. When he came back he was readmitted by Chayter, who surveyed him in respectful deprecation of the frivolity which had led him to attempt to help himself through such an evening in such a way.

He went to bed early and slept badly, which was unusual with him; but it was a pleasure to him to be

told almost as soon as he appeared that Mr. Carteret had asked for him. He went in to see him and was struck with the change in his appearance. He had, however, spent a day with him just after the New Year and another at the beginning of March, and had then noted in him the menace of the final weakness. A week after Julia Dallow's departure for the Continent he had again devoted several hours to the place and to the intention of telling his old friend how the happy event had been brought to naught — the advantage he had been so good as to desire for him and to make the condition of a splendid gift. Before this, for a few days, he had been keeping back, to announce it personally, the good news that Julia had at last set their situation in order: he wanted to enjoy the old man's pleasure — so sore a trial had her arbitrary behaviour been for a year. If she had offered Mr. Carteret a conciliatory visit before Christmas, had come down from London one day to lunch with him, this had but contributed to make him subsequently exhibit to poor Nick, as the victim of her elegant perversity, a great deal of earnest commiseration in a jocose form. Upon his honour, as he said, she was as clever and "specious" a woman — this was his odd expression — as he had ever seen in his life. The merit of her behaviour on that occasion, as Nick knew, was that she had not been specious at her lover's expense: she had breathed no doubt of his public purpose and had had the strange grace to say that in truth she was older than he, so that it was only fair to give his affections time to mature. But when Nick saw their hopeful host after

the rupture at which we have been present he found him in no state to deal with worries: he was seriously ailing, it was the beginning of worse things and not a time to put his attention to the stretch. After this excursion Nick had gone back to town saddened by his patient's now unmistakeably settled decline, but rather relieved that he had had himself to make no confession. It had even occurred to him that the need for making one at all might never come up. Certainly it would n't if the ebb of Mr. Carteret's strength should continue unchecked. He might pass away in the persuasion that everything would happen as he wished it, though indeed without enriching Nick on his wedding-day to the tune he had promised. Very likely he had made legal arrangements in virtue of which his bounty would take effect in case of the right event and in that case alone. At present Nick had a bigger, an uglier truth to tell — the last three days had made the difference; but, oddly enough, though his responsibility had increased his reluctance to speak had vanished: he was positively eager to clear up a situation over which it was not consistent with his honour to leave a shade.

The doctor had been right on coming in after dinner; it was clear in the morning that they had not seen the last of Mr. Carteret's power of picking up. Chayter, who had waited on him, refused austerely to change his opinion with every change in his master's temperature; but the nurses took the cheering view that it would do their charge good for Mr. Dormer to sit with him a little. One of them remained in the room, in the deep window-seat, and Nick

spent twenty minutes by the bedside. It was not a case for much conversation, but his helpless host seemed still to like to look at him. There was life in his kind old eyes, a stir of something that would express itself yet in some further wise provision. He laid his liberal hand on Nick's with a confidence that showed how little it was really disabled. He said very little, and the nurse had recommended that the visitor himself should not overflow in speech; but from time to time he murmured with a faint smile: "To-night's division, you know — you must n't miss it." There was probably to be no division that night, as happened, but even Mr. Carteret's aberrations were parliamentary. Before Nick withdrew he had been able to assure him he was rapidly getting better and that such valuable hours, the young man's own, must n't be wasted. "Come back on Friday if they come to the second reading." These were the words with which Nick was dismissed, and at noon the doctor said the invalid was doing very well, but that Nick had better leave him quiet for that day. Our young man accordingly determined to go up to town for the night, and even, should he receive no summons, for the next day. He arranged with Chayter that he should be telegraphed to if Mr. Carteret were either better or worse.

"Oh he can't very well be worse, sir," Chayter replied inexorably; but he relaxed so far as to remark that of course it would n't do for Nick to neglect the House.

"Oh the House!" — Nick was ambiguous and avoided the butler's eye. It would be easy enough

to tell Mr. Carteret, but nothing would have sustained him in the effort to make a clean breast to Chayter.

He might equivocate about the House, but he had the sense of things to be done awaiting him in London. He telegraphed to his servant and spent that night in Rosedale Road. The things to be done were apparently to be done in his studio: his servant met him there with a large bundle of letters. He failed that evening to stray within two miles of Westminster, and the legislature of his country reassembled without his support. The next morning he received a telegram from Chayter, to whom he had given Rosedale Road as an address. This missive simply informed him that Mr. Carteret wished to see him; it seemed a sign that he was better, though Chayter would n't say so. Nick again accordingly took his place in the train to Beauclere. He had been there very often, but it was present to him that now, after a little, he should go only once more — for a particular dismal occasion. All that was over, everything that belonged to it was over. He learned on his arrival — he saw Mrs. Lendon immediately — that his old friend had continued to pick up. He had expressed a strong and a perfectly rational desire to talk with his expected visitor, and the doctor had said that if it was about anything important they should forbear to oppose him. "He says it's about something very important," Mrs. Lendon remarked, resting shy eyes on him while she added that she herself was now sitting with her dear brother. She had sent those wonderful young ladies out to see the abbey. Nick paused with her outside Mr. Carteret's door. He wanted to say something

rather intimate and all soothing to her in return for her homely charity — give her a hint, for which she was far from looking, that practically he had now no interest in her brother's estate. This was of course impossible; her lack of irony, of play of mind, gave him no pretext, and such a reference would be an insult to her simple discretion. She was either not thinking of his interest at all, or was thinking of it with the tolerance of a nature trained to a hundred decent submissions. Nick looked a little into her mild uninvestigating eyes, and it came over him supremely that the goodness of these people was singularly pure: they were a part of what was cleanest and sanest and dullest in humanity. There had been just a little mocking inflexion in Mrs. Lendon's pleasant voice; but it was dedicated to the young ladies in the black uniforms — she could perhaps be humorous about *them* — and not to the theory of the "importance" of Nick's interview with her brother. His arrested desire to let her know he was not greedy translated itself into a vague friendliness and into the abrupt, rather bewildering words: "I can't tell you half the good I think of you." As he passed into Mr. Carteret's room it occurred to him that she would perhaps interpret this speech as an acknowledgement of obligation — of her good nature in not keeping him away from the rich old man.

XXXIII

The rich old man was propped up on pillows, and in this attitude, beneath the high spare canopy of his bed, presented himself to Nick's picture-seeking vision as a figure in a clever composition or a "story." He had gathered strength, though this strength was not much in his voice; it was mainly in his brighter eyes and his air of being pleased with himself. He put out his hand and said "I dare say you know why I sent for you;" on which Nick sank into the seat he had occupied the day before, replying that he had been delighted to come, whatever the reason. Mr. Carteret said nothing more about the division or the second reading; he only murmured that they were keeping the newspapers for him. "I'm rather behind — I'm rather behind," he went on; "but two or three quiet mornings will make it all right. You can go back to-night, you know — you can easily go back." This was the only thing not quite straight that Nick found in him — his making light of his young friend's flying to and fro. The young friend sat looking at him with a sense that was half compunction and half the idea of the rare beauty of his face, to which, strangely, the waste of illness now seemed to have restored something of its youth. Mr. Carteret was evidently conscious that this morning he should n't be able to go on long, so that he must be practical and concise. "I dare say you know — you've only to remember," he continued.

"I need n't tell you what a pleasure it is to me to see you — there can be no better reason than that," was what Nick could say.

"Has n't the year come round — the year of that foolish arrangement?"

Nick thought a little, asking himself if it were really necessary to disturb his companion's earnest faith. Then the consciousness of the falsity of his own position surged over him again and he replied: "Do you mean the period for which Mrs. Dallow insisted on keeping me dangling? Oh *that*'s over!" he almost gaily brought out.

"And are you married — has it come off?" the old man asked eagerly. "How long have I been ill?"

"We're uncomfortable unreasonable people, not deserving of your interest. We're not married," Nick said.

"Then I have n't been ill so long?" his host quavered with vague relief.

"Not very long — but things *are* different," he went on.

The old man's eyes rested on his — he noted how much larger they appeared. "You mean the arrangements are made — the day's at hand?"

"There are no arrangements," Nick smiled. "But why should it trouble you?"

"What then will you do — without arrangements?" The enquiry was plaintive and childlike.

"We shall do nothing — there's nothing to be done. We're not to be married — it's all off," said poor Nick. Then he added: "Mrs. Dallow has gone abroad."

The old man, motionless among his pillows, gave a long groan. "Ah I don't like that."

"No more do I, sir."

"What's the matter? It was so good — so good."

"It was n't good enough for Julia," Nick declared.

"For Julia? Is Julia so great as that? She told me she had the greatest regard for you. You're good enough for the best, my dear boy," Mr. Carteret pursued.

"You don't know me: I *am* disappointing. She had, I believe, a great regard for me, but I've forfeited her good opinion."

The old man stared at this cynical announcement: he searched his visitor's face for some attenuation of the words. But Nick apparently struck him as unashamed, and a faint colour coming into his withered cheek indicated his mystification and alarm. "Have you been unfaithful to her?" he still considerately asked.

"She thinks so — it comes to the same thing. As I told you a year ago, she does n't believe in me."

"You ought to have made her — you ought to have made her," said Mr. Carteret. Nick was about to plead some reason when he continued: "Do you remember what I told you I'd give you if you did? Do you remember what I told you I'd give you on your wedding-day?"

"You expressed the most generous intentions; and I remember them as much as a man may do who has no wish to remind you of them."

"The money's there — I've put it aside."

"I have n't earned it — I have n't earned a penny

of it. Give it to those who deserve it more," said Nick.

"I don't understand, I don't understand," Mr. Carteret whimpered, the tears of weakness in his eyes. His face flushed and he added: "I'm not good for much discussion; I'm very much disappointed."

"I think I may say it's not my fault — I've done what I can," Nick declared.

"But when people are in love they do more than that."

"Oh it's all over!" said our young man; not caring much now, for the moment, how disconcerted his companion might be, so long as he disabused him of the idea that they were partners to a bargain. "We've tormented each other and we've tormented you — and that's all that has come of it."

His companion's eyes seemed to stare at strange things. "Don't you care for what I'd have done for you — should n't you have liked it?"

"Of course one likes kindness—one likes money. But it's all over," Nick repeated. Then he added: "I fatigue you, I knock you up, with telling you these troubles. I only do so because it seems to me right you should know. But don't be worried — everything's for the best."

He patted the pale hand reassuringly, inclined himself affectionately, but Mr. Carteret was not easily soothed. He had practised lucidity all his life, had expected it of others and had never given his assent to an indistinct proposition. He was weak, yet not too weak to recognise that he had formed

a calculation now vitiated by a wrong factor — put his name to a contract of which the other side had not been carried out. More than fifty years of conscious success pressed him to try to understand; he had never muddled his affairs and he could n't muddle them now. At the same time he was aware of the necessity of economising his effort, and he would gather that inward force, patiently and almost cunningly, for the right question and the right induction. He was still able to make his agitation reflective, and it could still consort with his high hopes of Nick that he should find himself regarding mere vague verbal comfort, words in the air, as an inadequate guarantee. So after he had attached his dim vision to his young friend's face a moment he brought out: "Have you done anything bad?"

"Nothing worse than usual," Nick laughed.

"Ah everything should have been better than usual."

"Well, it has n't been that — that I must say."

"Do you sometimes think of your father?" Mr. Carteret continued.

Nick had a decent pause. "*You* make me think of him — you've always that pleasant effect."

"His name would have lived — it must n't be lost."

"Yes, but the competition to-day is terrible," Nick returned.

His host considered this as if he found a serious flaw in it; after which he began again: "I never supposed you a trifler."

"I'm determined not to be."

"I thought her charming. Don't you love Mrs. Dallow?" Mr. Carteret profoundly asked.

"Don't put it to me so to-day, for I feel sore and injured. I don't think she has treated me well."

"You should have held her — you should n't have let her go," the old man returned with unexpected fire.

His visitor flushed at this, so strange was it to receive a lesson in energy from a dying octogenarian. Yet after an instant Nick answered with due modesty: "I have n't been clever enough, no doubt."

"Don't say that, don't say that—!" Mr. Carteret shrunk from the thought. "Don't think I can allow you any easing-off of that sort. I know how well you've done. You're taking your place. Several gentlemen have told me. Has n't she felt a scruple, knowing my settlement on you to depend—?" he pursued.

"Oh she has n't known — has n't known anything about it."

"I don't understand; though I think you explained somewhat a year ago" — the poor gentleman gave it up. "I think she wanted to speak to me — of any intentions I might have in regard to you — the day she was here. Very nicely, very properly she'd have done it I'm sure. I think her idea was that I ought to make any settlement quite independent of your marrying her or not marrying her. But I tried to convey to her — I don't know whether she understood me — that I liked her too much for that, I wanted too much to make sure of her."

"To make sure of me, you mean," said Nick. "And now after all you see you have n't."

"Well, perhaps it was that," sighed the old man confusedly.

"All this is very bad for you — we'll talk again," Nick urged.

"No, no — let us finish it now. I like to know what I'm doing. I shall rest better when I do know. There are great things to be done; the future will be full — the future will be fine," Mr. Carteret wandered.

"Let me be distinct about this for Julia: that if we had n't been sundered her generosity to me would have been complete — she'd have put her great fortune absolutely at my disposal," Nick said after a moment. "Her consciousness of all that naturally carries her over any particular distress in regard to what won't come to me now from another source."

"Ah don't lose it!" the old man painfully pleaded.

"It's in your hands, sir," Nick returned.

"I mean Mrs. Dallow's fortune. It will be of the highest utility. That was what your father missed."

"I shall miss more than my father did," said Nick.

"She'll come back to you — I can't look at you and doubt that."

Nick smiled with a slow headshake. "Never, never, never! You look at me, my grand old friend, but you don't see me. I'm not what you think."

"What is it — what is it? *Have* you been bad?" Mr. Carteret panted.

"No, no; I'm not bad. But I'm different."

"Different —?"

"Different from my father. Different from Mrs. Dallow. Different from you."

"Ah why do you perplex me?" the old man moaned. "You've done something."

"I don't want to perplex you, but I *have* done something," said Nick, getting up.

He had heard the door open softly behind him and Mrs. Lendon come forward with precautions. "What has he done — what has he done?" quavered Mr. Carteret to his sister. She, however, after a glance at the patient, motioned their young friend away and, bending over the bed, replied, in a voice expressive at that moment of an ample provision of vital comfort:

"He has only excited you, I'm afraid, a little more than is good for you. Isn't your dear old head a little too high?" Nick regarded himself as justly banished, and he quitted the room with a ready acquiescence in any power to carry on the scene of which Mrs. Lendon might find herself possessed. He felt distinctly brutal as he heard his host emit a weak exhalation of assent to some change of position. But he would have reproached himself more if he had wished less to guard against the acceptance of an equivalent for duties unperformed. Mr. Carteret had had in his mind, characteristically, the idea of a fine high contract, and there was something more to be said about that.

Nick went out of the house and stayed away for two or three hours, quite ready to regard the place as quieter and safer without him. He haunted the abbey as usual and sat a long time in its simplifying stillness, turning over many things. He came back again at the luncheon-hour, through the garden, and heard,

somewhat to his surprise and greatly to his relief, that his host had composed himself promptly enough after their agitating interview. Mrs. Lendon talked at luncheon much as if she expected her brother to be, as she said, really quite fit again. She asked Nick no awkward question; which was uncommonly good of her, he thought, considering that she might have said "What in the world were you trying to get out of him?" She only reported to our young man that the invalid had every hope of a short interview about half-past seven, a *very* short one: this gentle emphasis was Mrs. Lendon's single tribute to the critical spirit. Nick divined that Mr. Carteret's desire for further explanations was really strong and had been capable of sustaining him through a bad morning, capable even of helping him — it would have been a secret and wonderful momentary conquest of weakness — to pass it off for a good one. He wished he might make a sketch of him, from the life, as he had seen him after breakfast; he had a conviction he could make a strong one, which would be a precious memento. But he shrank from proposing this — the dear man might think it unparliamentary. The doctor had called while Nick was out, and he came again at five o'clock without that inmate's seeing him. The latter was busy in his room at that hour: he wrote a short letter which took him a long time. But apparently there had been no veto on a resumption of talk, for at half-past seven his friend sent for him. The nurse at the door said "Only a moment, I hope, sir?" but took him in and then withdrew.

The prolonged daylight was in the room and its

occupant again established on his pile of pillows, but with his head a little lower. Nick sat down by him and expressed the hope of not having upset him in the morning; but the old man, with fixed enlarged eyes, took up their conversation exactly where they had left it. "What have you done — what have you done? Have you associated yourself with some other woman?"

"No, no; I don't think she can accuse me of that."

"Well then she'll come back to you if you take the right way with her."

It might have been droll to hear the poor gentleman, in his situation, give his views on the right way with women; but Nick was not moved to enjoy that diversion. "I've taken the wrong way. I've done something that must spoil my prospects in that direction for ever. I've written a letter," the visitor went on; but his companion had already interrupted him.

"You've written a letter?"

"To my constituents, informing them of my determination to resign my seat."

"To resign your seat?"

"I've made up my mind, after no end of reflexion, dear Mr. Carteret, to work on quite other lines. I've a plan of becoming a painter. So I've given up the idea of a political life."

"A painter?" Mr. Carteret seemed to turn whiter.

"I'm going in for the portrait in oils. It sounds absurd, I know, and I'm thus specific only to show you I don't in the least expect you to count on me." The invalid had continued to stare at first; then his eyes slowly closed and he lay motionless and blank.

"Don't let it trouble you now; it's a long story and rather a poor one; when you get better I'll tell you all about it. We'll talk it over amicably and I'll bring you to my view," Nick went on hypocritically. He had laid his hand again on the hand beside him; it felt cold, and as the old man remained silent he had a moment of exaggerated fear.

"This is dreadful news" — and Mr. Carteret opened his eyes.

"Certainly it must seem so to you, for I've always kept from you — I was ashamed, and my present confusion is a just chastisement — the great interest I have always taken in the —!" But Nick broke down with a gasp, to add presently, with an intention of the pleasant and a sense of the foolish: "In the pencil and the brush." He spoke of his current confusion, though his manner might have been thought to show it but little. He was himself surprised at his brazen assurance and had to recognise that at the point things had come to now he was profoundly obstinate and quiet.

"The pencil — the brush? They're not the weapons of a gentleman," Mr. Carteret pronounced.

"I was sure that would be your feeling. I repeat that I mention them only because you once said you intended to do something for me, as the phrase is, and I thought you ought n't to do it in ignorance."

"My ignorance was better. Such knowledge is n't good for me."

"Forgive me, my dear old friend." Nick kept it bravely up. "When you're better you'll see it differently."

"I shall never be better now."

"Ah no," Nick insisted; "it will really do you good after a little. Think it over quietly and you'll be glad I've stopped humbugging."

"I loved you — I loved you as my son," the old man wailed.

He sank on his knee beside the bed and leaned over him tenderly. "Get better, get better, and I'll be your son for the rest of your life."

"Poor Dormer — poor Dormer!" Mr. Carteret continued to lament.

"I admit that if he had lived I probably should n't have done it," said Nick. "I dare say I should have deferred to his prejudices even though thinking them narrow."

"Do you turn against your father?" his host asked, making, to disengage his arm from the young man's touch, an effort betraying the irritation of conscious weakness. Nick got up at this and stood a moment looking down at him while he went on: "Do you give up your name, do you give up your country?"

"If I do something good my country may like it." Nick spoke as if he had thought that out.

"Do you regard them as equal, the two glories?"

"Here comes your nurse to blow me up and turn me out," said Nick.

The nurse had come in, but Mr. Carteret directed to her an audible dry courteous "Be so good as to wait till I send for you" which arrested her in the large room at some distance from the bed and then had the effect of making her turn on her heel with a professional laugh. She clearly judged that an old

gentleman with the fine manner of his prime might still be trusted to take care of himself. When she had gone that personage addressed to his visitor the question for which his deep displeasure lent him strength. "Do you pretend there's a nobler life than a high political career?"

"I think the noble life's doing one's work well. One can do it very ill and be very base and mean in what you call a high political career. I have n't been in the House so many months without finding that out. It contains some very small souls."

"You should stand against them — you should expose them!" stammered Mr. Carteret.

"Stand against them, against one's own party?"

The old man contended a moment with this and then broke out: "God forgive you, are you a Tory, are you a Tory?"

"How little you understand me!" laughed Nick with a ring of bitterness.

"Little enough — little enough, my boy. Have you sent your electors your dreadful letter?"

"Not yet; but it's all ready and I shan't change my mind."

"You will — you will. You'll think better of it. You'll see your duty," said the invalid almost coaxingly.

"That seems very improbable, for my determination, crudely and abruptly as, to my great regret, it comes to you here, is the fruit of a long and painful struggle. The difficulty is that I see my duty just in this other effort."

"An effort? Do you call it an effort to fall away,

to sink far down, to give up *every* effort? What does your mother say, heaven help her?" Mr. Carteret went on before Nick could answer the other question.

"I have n't told her yet."

"You're ashamed, you're ashamed!" Nick only looked out of the west window now — he felt his ears turn hot. "Tell her it would have been sixty thousand. I had the money all ready."

"I shan't tell her that," said Nick, redder still.

"Poor woman — poor dear woman!" Mr. Carteret woefully cried.

"Yes indeed — she won't like it."

"Think it all over again; don't throw away a splendid future!" These words were uttered with a final flicker of passion — Nick had never heard such an accent on his old friend's lips. But he next began to murmur "I'm tired — I'm very tired" and sank back with a groan and with closed lips. His guest gently assured him that he had but too much cause to be exhausted and that the worst was over now. He smoothed his pillows for him and said he must leave him, would send in the nurse. "Come back, come back," Mr. Carteret pleaded against that; "come back and tell me it's a horrible dream."

Nick did go back very late that evening; his host had sent a message to his room. But one of the nurses was on the ground this time and made good her opposition watch in hand. The sick-room was shrouded and darkened; the shaded candle left the bed in gloom. Nick's interview with his venerable friend was the affair of but a moment; the nurse interposed, impatient and not understanding. She heard

Nick say that he had posted his letter now and their companion flash out with an acerbity still savouring of the sordid associations of a world he had not done with. "Then of course my settlement does n't take effect!"

"Oh that's all right," Nick answered kindly; and he went off next morning by the early train — his injured host was still sleeping. Mrs. Lendon's habits made it easy for her to be present in matutinal bloom at the young man's hasty breakfast, and she sent a particular remembrance to Lady Agnes and (when he should see them) to the Ladies Flora and Elizabeth. Nick had a prevision of the spirit in which his mother at least would now receive hollow compliments from Beauclere.

The night before, as soon as he had quitted Mr. Carteret, the old man said to the nurse that he wished Mr. Chayter instructed to go and fetch Mr. Mitton the first thing in the morning. Mr. Mitton was the leading solicitor at Beauclere.

XXXIV

The really formidable thing for Nick had been to tell his mother: a truth of which he was so conscious that he had the matter out with her the very morning he returned from Beauclere. She and Grace had come back the afternoon before from their own enjoyment of rural hospitality, and, knowing this — she had written him her intention from the country — he drove straight from the station to Calcutta Gardens. There was a little room on the right of the house-door known as his own room, but in which of a morning, when he was not at home, Lady Agnes sometimes wrote her letters. These were always numerous, and when she heard our young man's cab she happened to be engaged with them at the big brass-mounted bureau that had belonged to his father, where, amid a margin of works of political reference, she seemed to herself to make public affairs feel the point of her elbow.

She came into the hall to meet her son and to hear about their benefactor, and Nick went straight back into the room with her and closed the door. It would be in the evening paper and she would see it, and he had no right to allow her to wait for that. It proved indeed a terrible hour; and when ten minutes later Grace, who had learned upstairs her brother's return, went down for further news of him she heard from the hall a sound of voices that made her first

pause and then retrace her steps on tiptoe. She mounted to the drawing-room and crept about there, palpitating, looking at moments into the dull street and wondering what on earth had taken place. She had no one to express her wonder to, for Florence Tressilian had departed and Biddy after breakfast betaken herself, in accordance with a custom now inveterate, to Rosedale Road. Her mother was unmistakeably and passionately crying — a fact tremendous in its significance, for Lady Agnes had not often been brought so low. Nick had seen her cry, but this almost awful spectacle had seldom been offered to Grace, and it now convinced her that some dreadful thing had happened.

That was of course in order, after Nick's mysterious quarrel with Julia, which had made his mother so ill and was at present followed up with new horrors. The row, as Grace mentally phrased it, had had something to do with the rupture of the lovers — some deeper depth of disappointment had begun to yawn. Grace asked herself if they were talking about Broadwood; if Nick had demanded that in the conditions so unpleasantly altered Lady Agnes should restore that awfully nice house to its owner. This was very possible, but why should he so suddenly have broken out about it? And moreover their mother, though sore to bleeding about the whole business — for Broadwood, in its fresh comfort, was too delightful — would n't have met this pretension with tears: had n't she already so perversely declared that they could n't decently continue to make use of the place? Julia had said that of course they must go on, but Lady Agnes

was prepared with an effective rejoinder to that. It did n't consist of words — it was to be austerely practical, was to consist of letting Julia see, at the moment she should least expect it, that they quite would n't go on. Lady Agnes was ostensibly waiting for this moment — the moment when her renunciation would be most impressive.

Grace was conscious of how she had for many days been moving with her mother in darkness, deeply stricken by Nick's culpable — oh he was culpable! — loss of his prize, but feeling an obscure element in the matter they did n't grasp, an undiscovered explanation that would perhaps make it still worse, though it might make *them*, poor things, a little better. He had explained nothing, he had simply said "Dear mother, we don't hit it off, after all; it's an awful bore, but we don't" — as if that were in the dire conditions an adequate balm for two aching hearts. From Julia naturally no flood of light was to be looked for — Julia *never* humoured curiosity — and, though she very often did the thing you would n't suppose, she was not unexpectedly apologetic in this case. Grace recognised that in such a position it would savour of apology for her to disclose to Lady Agnes her grounds for having let Nick off; and she would n't have liked to be the person to suggest to Julia that any one looked for anything from her. Neither of the disunited pair blamed the other or cast an aspersion, and it was all very magnanimous and superior and impenetrable and exasperating. With all this Grace had a suspicion that Biddy knew something more, that for Biddy the tormenting curtain had been lifted.

Biddy had come and gone in these days with a perceptible air of detachment from the tribulations of home. It had made her, fortunately, very pretty — still prettier than usual: it sometimes happened that at moments when Grace was most angry she had a faint sweet smile which might have been drawn from some source of occult consolation. It was perhaps in some degree connected with Peter Sherringham's visit, as to which the girl had not been superstitiously silent. When Grace asked her if she had secret information and if it pointed to the idea that everything would be all right in the end, she pretended to know nothing — What should she know? she asked with the loveliest arch of eyebrows over an unblinking candour — and begged her sister not to let Lady Agnes believe her better off than themselves. She contributed nothing to their gropings save a much better patience, but she went with noticeable regularity, on the pretext of her foolish modelling, to Rosedale Road. She was frankly on Nick's side; not going so far as to say he had been right, but saying distinctly how sure she was that, whatever had happened, he could n't have helped it, not a mite. This was striking, because, as Grace knew, the younger of the sisters had been much favoured by Julia and would n't have sacrificed her easily. It associated itself in the irritated mind of the elder with Biddy's frequent visits to the studio and made Miss Dormer ask herself if the crisis in Nick's and Julia's business had not somehow been linked to that unnatural spot.

She had gone there two or three times while Biddy

was working, gone to pick up any clue to the mystery that might peep out. But she had put her hand on nothing more — it would n't have occurred to her to say nothing less — than the so dreadfully pointed presence of Gabriel Nash. She once found that odd satellite, to her surprise, paying a visit to her sister — he had come for Nick, who was absent; she remembered how they had met in Paris and how little he had succeeded with them. When she had asked Biddy afterwards how she could receive him that way Biddy had replied that even she, Grace, would have some charity for him if she could hear how fond he was of poor Nick. He had talked to her only of Nick — of nothing else. Grace had observed how she spoke of Nick as injured, and had noted the implication that some one else, ceasing to be fond of him, was thereby condemned in Biddy's eyes. It seemed to Grace that some one else had at least a right not to like some of his friends. The studio struck her as mean and horrid; and so far from suggesting to her that it could have played a part in making Nick and Julia fall out she only felt how little its dusty want of consequence could count, one way or the other, for Julia. Grace, who had no opinions on art, saw no merit whatever in those "impressions" on canvas from Nick's hand with which the place was bestrewn. She did n't at all wish her brother to have talent in that direction, yet it was secretly humiliating to her that he had n't more.

Nick meanwhile felt a pang of almost horrified penitence, in the little room on the right of the hall, the moment after he had made his mother really under-

stand he had thrown up his seat and that it would probably be in the evening papers. That she would take this very ill was an idea that had pressed upon him hard enough, but she took it even worse than he had feared. He measured, in the look she gave him when the full truth loomed upon her, the mortal cruelty of her distress; her face was like that of a passenger on a ship who sees the huge bows of another vessel towering close out of the fog. There are visions of dismay before which the best conscience recoils, and though Nick had made his choice on all the grounds there were a few minutes in which he would gladly have admitted that his wisdom was a dark mistake. His heart was in his throat, he had gone too far; he had been ready to disappoint his mother — he had not been ready to destroy her.

Lady Agnes, I hasten to add, was not destroyed; she made, after her first drowning gasp, a tremendous scene of opposition, in the face of which her son could only fall back on his intrenchments. She must know the worst, he had thought: so he told her everything, including the little story of the forfeiture of his "expectations" from Mr. Carteret. He showed her this time not only the face of the matter, but what lay below it; narrated briefly the incident in his studio which had led to Julia Dallow's deciding she could n't after all put up with him. This was wholly new to Lady Agnes, she had had no clue to it, and he could instantly see how it made the event worse for her, adding a hideous positive to an abominable negative. He noted now that, distressed and distracted as she had been by his rupture with Julia,

she had still held to the faith that their engagement would come on again; believing evidently that he had a personal empire over the mistress of Harsh which would bring her back. Lady Agnes was forced to recognise this empire as precarious, to forswear the hope of a blessed renewal from the moment the question was of base infatuations on his own part. Nick confessed to an infatuation, but did his best to show her it was n't base; that it was n't — since Julia had had faith in his loyalty — for the person of the young lady who had been discovered posturing to him and whom he had seen but half a dozen times in his life. He endeavoured to recall to his mother the identity of this young lady, he adverted to the occasion in Paris when they all had seen her together. But Lady Agnes's mind and memory were a blank on the subject of Miss Miriam Rooth and she wanted to hear nothing whatever about her: it was enough that she was the cause of their ruin and a part of his pitiless folly. She needed to know nothing of her to allude to her as if it were superfluous to give a definite name to the class to which she belonged.

But she gave a name to the group in which Nick had now taken his place, and it made him feel after the lapse of years like a small scolded sorry boy again; for it was so far away he could scarcely remember it — besides there having been but a moment or two of that sort in his happy childhood — the time when this parent had slapped him and called him a little fool. He was a big fool now — hugely immeasurable; she repeated the term over and over with high-pitched passion. The most painful thing in this

painful hour was perhaps his glimpse of the strange feminine cynicism that lurked in her fine sense of injury. Where there was such a complexity of revolt it would have been difficult to pick out particular wrongs; but Nick could see that, to his mother's imagination, he was most a fool for not having kept his relations with the actress, whatever they were, better from Julia's knowledge. He remained indeed freshly surprised at the ardour with which she had rested her hopes on Julia. Julia was certainly a combination — she was accomplished, she was a sort of leading woman and she was rich; but after all — putting aside what she might be to a man in love with her — she was not the keystone of the universe. Yet the form in which the consequences of his apostasy appeared most to come home to Lady Agnes was the loss for the Dormer family of the advantages attached to the possession of Mrs. Dallow. The larger mortification would round itself later; for the hour the damning thing was that Nick had made that lady the gift of an unforgiveable grievance. He had clinched their separation by his letter to his electors — and that above all was the wickedness of the letter. Julia would have got over the other woman, but she would never get over his becoming a nobody.

Lady Agnes challenged him upon this low prospect exactly as if he had embraced it with the malignant purpose of making the return of his late intended impossible. She contradicted her premises and lost her way in her wrath. What had made him suddenly turn round if he had been in good faith before? He had never been in good faith — never,

never; he had had from his earliest childhood the nastiest hankerings after a vulgar little daubing trash-talking life; they were not in him, the grander nobler aspirations — they never had been — and he had been anything but honest to lead her on, to lead them all on, to think he would do something: the fall and the shame would have been less for them if they had come earlier. Moreover what need under heaven had he to tell Charles Carteret of the cruel folly on his very death-bed? — as if he might n't have let it all alone and accepted the benefit the old man was so delighted to confer. No wonder Mr. Carteret would keep his money for his heirs if that was the way Nick proposed to repay him; but where was the common sense, where was the common charity, where was the common decency of tormenting him with such vile news in his last hours? Was he trying what he could invent that would break her heart, that would send her in sorrow down to her grave? Were n't they all miserable enough and had n't he a ray of pity for his wretched sisters?

The relation of effect and cause, in regard to his sisters' wretchedness, was but dimly discernible to Nick, who, however, perceived his mother genuinely to consider that his action had disconnected them all, still more than she held they were already disconnected, from the good things of life. Julia was money, Mr. Carteret was money — everything else was the absence of it. If these precious people had been primarily money for Nick it after all flattered the distributive impulse in him to have taken for granted that for the rest of the family too the difference would

have been so great. For days, for weeks and months to come, the little room on the right of the hall was to vibrate for our young man, as if the very walls and window-panes still suffered, with the odious trial of his true temper.

XXXV

THAT evening — the evening of his return from Beauclere — he was conscious of a keen desire to get away, to go abroad, to leave behind him the little chatter his resignation would be sure to produce in an age of publicity which never discriminated as to the quality of events. Then he felt it decidedly better to stay, to see the business through on the spot. Besides, he would have to meet his constituents — would a parcel of cheese-eating burgesses ever have been "met" on so queer an occasion? — and when that was over the incident would practically be closed. Nick had an idea he knew in advance how it would affect him to be pointed at as a person who had given up a considerable chance of eventual "office" to take likenesses at so much a head. He would n't attempt down at Harsh to touch on the question of motive; for, given the nature of the public mind of Harsh, that would be a strain on his faculty of exposition. But as regards the chaff of the political world and of society he had a hope he should find chaff enough for retorts. It was true that when his mother twitted him in her own effective way he had felt rather flattened out; but then one's mother might have a heavier hand than any one else.

He had not thrown up the House of Commons to amuse himself; he had thrown it up to work, to sit quietly down and bend over his task. If he should

go abroad his parent might think he had some weak-minded view of joining Julia and trying, with however little hope, to win her back — an illusion it would be singularly pernicious to encourage. His desire for Julia's society had succumbed for the present at any rate to a dire interruption — he had become more and more aware of their speaking a different language. Nick felt like a young man who has gone to the Rhineland to "get up" his German for an examination — committed to talk, to read, to dream only in the new idiom. Now that he had taken his jump everything was simplified, at the same time that everything was pitched in a higher and intenser key; and he wondered how in the absence of a common dialect he had conversed on the whole so happily with Mrs. Dallow. Then he had aftertastes of understandings tolerably independent of words. He was excited because every fresh responsibility is exciting, and there was no manner of doubt he had accepted one. No one knew what it was but himself — Gabriel Nash scarcely counted, his whole attitude on the question of responsibility being so fantastic — and he would have to ask his dearest friends to take him on trust. Rather indeed he would ask nothing of any one, but would cultivate independence, mulishness and gaiety, and fix his thoughts on a bright if distant morrow. It was disagreeable to have to remember that his task would not be sweetened by a sense of heroism; for if it might be heroic to give up the muses for the strife of great affairs, no romantic glamour worth speaking of would ever gather round an Englishman who in the prime of his

strength had given up great or even small affairs for the muses. Such an original might himself privately and perversely regard certain phases of this inferior commerce as a great affair; but who would give him the benefit of that sort of confidence — except indeed a faithful clever exalted little sister Biddy, if he should have the good luck to have one? Biddy was in fact all ready for heroic flights and eager to think she might fight the battle of the beautiful by her brother's side; so that he had really to moderate her and remind her how little his actual job was a crusade with bugles and banners and how much a grey sedentary grind, the charm of which was all at the core. You might have an emotion about it, and an emotion that would be a help, but this was not the sort of thing you could show — the end in view would seem so disproportionately small. Nick put it to her that one really could n't talk to people about the "responsibility" of what she would see him pottering at in his studio.

He therefore did n't "run," as he would have said, to winged words any more than he was forced to, having moreover a sense that apologetic work (if apology it should be called to carry the war straight into the enemy's country) might be freely left to Gabriel Nash. He laid the weight of explanation on his commentators, meeting them all on the firm ground of his own amusement. He saw he should live for months in a thick cloud of irony, not the finest air of the season, and he adopted the weapon to which a person whose use of tobacco is only occasional resorts when every one else produces a cigar — he

puffed the spasmodic defensive cigarette. He accepted as to what he had done the postulate of the obscurely tortuous, abounding so in that sense that his critics were themselves bewildered. Some of them felt that they got, as the phrase is, little out of him — he rose in his good humour so much higher than the "rise" they had looked for — on his very first encounter with the world after his scrimmage with his mother. He went to a dinner-party — he had accepted the invitation many days before — having seen his resignation, in the form of a telegram from Harsh, announced in the evening papers. The people he found there had seen it as well, and the wittiest wanted to know what he was now going to do. Even the most embarrassed asked if it were true he had changed his politics. He gave different answers to different persons, but left most of them under the impression that he had strange scruples of conscience. This, however, was not a formidable occasion, for there had happened to be no one present he would have desired, on the old basis, especially to gratify. There were real good friends it would be less easy to meet — Nick was almost sorry for an hour that he had so many real good friends. If he had had more enemies the case would have been simpler, and he was fully aware that the hardest thing of all would be to be let off too easily. Then he would appear to himself to have been put, all round, on his generosity, and his deviation would thus wear its ugliest face.

When he left the place at which he had been dining he betook himself to Rosedale Road: he saw no reason why he should go down to the House, though

he knew he had not done with that yet. He had a dread of behaving as if he supposed he should be expected to make a farewell speech, and was thankful his eminence was not of a nature to create on such an occasion a demand for his oratory. He had in fact nothing whatever to say in public — not a vain word, not a sorry syllable. Though the hour was late he found Gabriel Nash established in his studio, drawn thither by the fine exhilaration of having seen an evening paper. Trying it late, on the chance, he had been told by Nick's servant that Nick would sleep there that night, and he had come in to wait, he was so eager to congratulate him. Nick submitted with a good grace to his society — he was tired enough to go to bed, but was restless too — in spite of noting now, oddly enough, that Nash's congratulations could add little to his fortitude. He had felt a good deal, before, as if he were in this philosopher's hands; but since making his final choice he had begun to strike himself as all in his own. Gabriel might have been the angel of that name, but no angel could assist him much henceforth.

Nash indeed was as true as ever to his genius while he lolled on a divan and emitted a series of reflexions that were even more ingenious than opportune. Nick walked up and down the room, and it might have been supposed from his manner that he was impatient for his friend to withdraw. This idea would have been contradicted, however, by the fact that subsequently, after the latter had quitted him, he continued to perambulate. He had grown used to Gabriel and must now have been possessed of all he

had to say. That was one's penalty with persons whose main gift was for talk, however inspiring; talk engendered a sense of sameness much sooner than action. The things a man did were necessarily more different from each other than the things he said, even if he went in for surprising you. Nick felt Nash could never surprise him any more save by mere plain perpetration.

He talked of his host's future, talked of Miriam Rooth and of Peter Sherringham, whom he had seen at that young woman's and whom he described as in a predicament delightful to behold. Nick put a question about Peter's predicament and learned, rather to his disappointment, that it consisted only of the fact that he was in love with Miriam. He appealed to his visitor to do better than this, and Nash then added the touch that Sherringham would n't be able to have her. "Oh they 've ideas!" he said when Nick asked him why.

"What ideas? So has he, I suppose."

"Yes, but they 're not the same."

"Well, they 'll nevertheless arrange something," Nick opined.

"You 'll have to help them a bit. She's in love with another man," Nash went on.

"Do you mean with you?"

"Oh I 'm never another man — I 'm always more the wrong one than the man himself. It's you she's after." And on his friend's asking him what he meant by this Nash added: "While you were engaged in transferring her image to the tablet of your genius you stamped your own on that of her heart."

Nick stopped in his walk, staring. "Ah what a bore!"

"A bore? Don't you think her formed to please?"

Nick wondered, but did n't conclude. "I wanted to go on with her — now I can't."

Nash himself, however, jumped straight to what really mattered. "My dear fellow, it only makes her handsomer. I wondered what happy turn she had taken."

"Oh that's twaddle," said Nick, turning away. "Besides, has she told you?"

"No, but her mother has."

"Has she told her mother?"

"Mrs. Rooth says not. But I've known Mrs. Rooth to say that which is n't."

"Apply that rule then to the information you speak of."

"Well, since you press me, I know more," Gabriel said. "Miriam knows you're engaged to a wonderful rich lady; she told me as much, told me she had seen her here. That was enough to set her off — she likes forbidden fruit."

"I'm not engaged to any lady whatever. I was," Nick handsomely conceded, "but we've altered our minds."

"Ah what a pity!" his friend wailed.

"Mephistopheles!" — and he stopped again with the point of this.

"Pray then whom do you call Margaret? May I ask if your failure of interest in the political situation is the cause of this change in your personal one?" Nash went on. Nick signified that he might n't;

whereupon he added: "I'm not in the least devilish — I only mean it's a pity you've altered your minds, since Miriam may in consequence alter hers. She goes from one thing to another. However, I won't tell her."

"I will then!" Nick declared between jest and earnest.

"Would that really be prudent?" his companion asked more completely in the frolic key.

"At any rate," he resumed, "nothing would induce me to interfere with Peter Sherringham. That sounds fatuous, but to you I don't mind appearing an ass."

"The thing would be to get Sherringham, out of spite," Nash threw off, "to entangle himself with another woman."

"What good would that do?"

"Ah Miriam would then begin to think of him."

"Spite surely is n't a conceivable motive — for a healthy man."

The plea, however, found Gabriel ready. "Sherringham's just precisely not a healthy man. He's too much in love."

"Then he won't care for another woman."

"He would try to, and that would produce its effect — its effect on Miriam."

"You talk like an American novel. Let him try, and God keep us all straight." Nick adverted in extreme silence to his poor little Biddy and greatly hoped — he would have to see to it a little — that Peter would n't "try" on *her*. He changed the subject and before Nash withdrew took occasion to

remark — the occasion was offered by some new allusion of the visitor's to the sport he hoped to extract from seeing Nick carry out everything to which he stood committed — that the comedy of the matter would fall flat and the incident pass unnoticed.

But Nash lost no heart. "Oh if you'll simply do your part I'll take care of the rest."

"If you mean by doing my part minding my business and working like a beaver I shall easily satisfy you," Nick replied.

"Ah you reprobate, you'll become another Sir Joshua, a mere P. R. A.!" his companion railed, getting up to go.

When he had gone Nick threw himself back on the cushions of the divan and, with his hands locked above his head, sat a long time lost in thought. He had sent his servant to bed; he was unmolested. He gazed before him into the gloom produced by the unheeded burning-out of the last candle. The vague outer light came in through the tall studio window and the painted images, ranged about, looked confused in the dusk. If his mother had seen him she might have thought he was staring at his father's ghost.

XXXVI

THE night Peter Sherringham walked away from Balaklava Place with Gabriel Nash the talk of the two men directed itself, as was natural at the time, to the question of Miriam's future fame and the pace, as Nash called it, at which she would go. Critical spirits as they both were, and one of them as dissimulative in passion as the other was paradoxical in the absence of it, they yet took her career for granted as completely as the simple-minded, a pair of hot spectators in the pit, might have done, and exchanged observations on the assumption that the only uncertain element would be the pace. This was a proof of general subjugation. Peter wished not to show, yet wished to know, and in the restlessness of his anxiety was ready even to risk exposure, great as the sacrifice might be of the imperturbable urbane scepticism most appropriate to a secretary of embassy. He could n't rid himself of the sense that Nash had got up earlier than he, had had opportunities of contact in days already distant, the days of Mrs. Rooth's hungry foreign rambles. Something of authority and privilege stuck to him from this, and it made Sherringham still more uncomfortable when he was most conscious that, at the best, even the trained diplomatic mind would never get a grasp of Miriam as a whole. She was constructed to revolve like the terraqueous globe; some part or other of her was always out of sight or in shadow.

Peter talked to conceal his feelings, and, like many a man practising that indirectness, rather lost himself in the wood. They agreed that, putting strange accidents aside, the girl would go further than any one had gone in England within the memory of man; and that it was a pity, as regards marking the comparison, that for so long no one had gone any distance worth speaking of. They further agreed that it would naturally seem absurd to any one who did n't know, their prophesying such big things on such small evidence; and they agreed lastly that the absurdity quite vanished as soon as the prophets knew as *they* knew. Their knowledge — they quite recognised this — was simply confidence raised to a high point, the communication of their young friend's own confidence. The conditions were enormously to make, but it was of the very essence of Miriam's confidence that she would make them. The parts, the plays, the theatres, the "support," the audiences, the critics, the money were all to be found, but she cast a spell that prevented this from seeming a serious hitch. One might n't see from one day to the other what she would do or how she would do it, but this would n't stay her steps — she would none the less go on. She would have to construct her own road, as it were, but at the worst there would only be delays in making it. These delays would depend on the hardness of the stones she had to break.

As Peter had noted, you never knew where to "have" Gabriel Nash; a truth exemplified in his unexpected delight at the prospect of Miriam's drawing forth the modernness of the age. You might

have thought he would loathe that modernness; but he had a joyous amused amusing vision of it — saw it as something huge and fantastically vulgar. Its vulgarity would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station, and the publicity achieved by their charming charge be as big as the globe itself. All the machinery was ready, the platform laid; the facilities, the wires and bells and trumpets, the roaring deafening newspaperism of the period — its most distinctive sign — were waiting for her, their predestined mistress, to press her foot on the spring and set them all in motion. Gabriel brushed in a large bright picture of her progress through the time and round the world, round it and round it again, from continent to continent and clime to clime; with populations and deputations, reporters and photographers, placards and interviews and banquets, steamers, railways, dollars, diamonds, speeches and artistic ruin all jumbled into her train. Regardless of expense the spectacle would be and thrilling, though somewhat monotonous, the drama — a drama more bustling than any she would put on the stage and a spectacle that would beat everything for scenery. In the end her divine voice would crack, screaming to foreign ears and antipodal barbarians, and her clever manner would lose all quality, simplified to a few unmistakeable knock-down dodges. Then she would be at the fine climax of life and glory, still young and insatiate, but already coarse hard and raddled, with nothing left to do and nothing left to do it with, the remaining years all before her and the *raison d'être* all behind. It would be splendid dreadful grotesque.

"Oh, she'll have some good years — they'll be worth having," Peter insisted as they went. "Besides, you see her too much as a humbug and too little as a real producer. She has ideas — great ones; she loves the thing for itself. That may keep a woman serious."

"Her greatest idea must always be to show herself, and fortunately she has a great quantity of that treasure to show. I think of her absolutely as a real producer, but as a producer whose production is her own person. No 'person,' even as fine a one as hers, will stand that for more than an hour, so that humbuggery has very soon to lend a hand. However," Nash continued, "if she's a fine humbug it will do as well, it will perfectly suit the time. We can all be saved by vulgarity; that's the solvent of all difficulties and the blessing of this delightful age. One does n't die of it — save in soul and sense: one dies only of minding it. Therefore let no man despair — a new hope has dawned."

"She'll do her work like any other worker, with the advantage over many that her talent's rare," Peter obliquely answered. "Compared with the life of many women that's security and sanity of the highest order. Then she can't help her beauty. You can't vulgarise that."

"Oh can't you?" Gabriel cried.

"It will abide with her till the day of her death. It is n't a mere superficial freshness. She's very noble."

"Yes, that's the pity of it," said Nash. "She's a big more or less directed force, and I quite admit that

she'll do for a while a lot of good. She'll have brightened up the world for a great many people — have brought the ideal nearer to them and held it fast for an hour with its feet on earth and its great wings trembling. That's always something, for blest is he who has dropped even the smallest coin into the little iron box that contains the precious savings of mankind. Miriam will doubtless have dropped a big gold-piece. It will be found in the general scramble on the day the race goes bankrupt. And then for herself she'll have had a great go at life."

"Oh yes, she'll have got out of her hole — she won't have vegetated," Peter concurred. "That makes her touching to me — it adds to the many good reasons for which one may want to help her. She's tackling a big job, and tackling it by herself; throwing herself upon the world in good faith and dealing with it as she can; meeting alone, in her youth, her beauty, her generosity, all the embarrassments of notoriety and all the difficulties of a profession of which, if one half 's what's called brilliant the other's frankly odious."

"She has great courage, but you speak of her as solitary with such a lot of us all round her?" Nash candidly enquired.

"She's a great thing for you and me, but we're a small thing for her."

"Well, a good many small things, if they but stick together, may make up a mass," Gabriel said. "There must always be the *man*, you see. He's the indispensable element in such a life, and he'll be the last thing she'll ever lack."

"What man are you talking about?" Peter asked with imperfect ease.

"The man of the hour, whoever he is. She'll inspire innumerable devotions."

"Of course she will, and they'll be precisely a part of the insufferable side of her life."

"Insufferable to whom?" Nash demanded. "Don't forget that the insufferable side of her life will be just the side she'll thrive on. You can't eat your cake and have it, and you can't make omelettes without breaking eggs. You can't at once sit by the fire and parade about the world, and you can't take all chances without having some adventures. You can't be a great actress without the luxury of nerves. Without a plentiful supply — or without the right ones — you'll only be second fiddle. If you've all the tense strings you may take life for your fiddlestick. Your nerves and your adventures, your eggs and your cake, are part of the cost of the most expensive of professions. You play with human passions, with exaltations and ecstasies and terrors, and if you trade on the fury of the elements you must know how to ride the storm."

Well, Peter thought it over. "Those are the fine old commonplaces about the artistic temperament, but I usually find the artist a very meek decent little person."

"You *never* find the artist — you only find his work, and that's all you need find. When the artist's a woman, and the woman's an actress, meekness and decency will doubtless be there in the right proportions," Nash went on. "Miriam will represent them for you, if you give her her cue, with the utmost charm."

"Of course she'll inspire devotions — *that* 's all right," said Peter with a wild cheerfulness.

"And of course they'll inspire responses, and with that consequence — don't you see? — they'll mitigate her solitude, they'll even enliven it," Nash set forth.

"She'll probably box a good many ears: that'll be lively!" Peter returned with some grimness.

"Oh magnificent! — it will be a merry life. Yet with its tragic passages, its distracted or its pathetic hours," Gabriel insisted. "In short a little of everything."

They walked on without further speech till at last Peter resumed: "The best thing for a woman in her situation is to marry some decent care-taking man."

"Oh I dare say she'll do that too!" Nash laughed; a remark as a result of which his companion lapsed afresh into silence. Gabriel left him a little to enjoy this; after which he added: "There's somebody she'd marry to-morrow."

Peter wondered. "Do you mean her friend Dashwood?"

"No, no, I mean Nick Dormer."

"She'd marry *him?*" Peter gasped.

"I mean her head's full of him. But she'll hardly get the chance."

Peter watched himself. "Does she like him as much as that?"

"I don't quite know how much you mean, but enough for all practical ends."

"Marrying a fashionable actress is hardly a practical end."

"Certainly not, but I'm not speaking from his point of view." Nash was perfectly lucid. "Moreover I thought you just now said it would be such a good thing for her."

"To marry Nick Dormer?"

"You said a good decent man, and he's one of the very decentest."

"I was n't thinking of the individual, but of the protection. It would fence her about, settle certain questions, or appear to; it would make things safe and comfortable for her and keep a lot of cads and blackguards away."

"She ought to marry the prompter or the box-keeper," said Nash. "Then it would be all right. I think indeed they generally do, don't they?"

Peter felt for a moment a strong disposition to drop his friend on the spot, to cross to the other side of the street and walk away without him. But there was a different impulse which struggled with this one and after a minute overcame it, the impulse that led to his saying presently: "Has she told you she's — a — she's in love with Nick?"

"No, no — that's not the way I know it."

"Has Nick told you then?"

"On the contrary, I've told *him*."

"You've rendered him a questionable service if you've no proof," Peter pronounced.

"My proof's only that I've seen her with him. She's charming, poor dear thing."

"But surely she is n't in love with every man she's charming to."

"I mean she's charming to *me*," Nash returned.

"I see her that way. I see her interested — and what it does to her, with her, *for* her. But judge for yourself — the first time you get a chance."

"When shall I get a chance? Nick does n't come near her."

"Oh he 'll come, he 'll come; his picture is n't finished."

"You mean *he* 'll be the box-keeper, then?"

"My dear fellow, I shall never allow it," said Gabriel Nash. "It would be idiotic and quite unnecessary. He 's beautifully arranged — in quite a different line. Fancy his taking that sort of job on his hands! Besides, she 'd never expect it; she 's not such a goose. They 're very good friends — it will go on that way. She 's an excellent person for him to know; she 'll give him lots of ideas of the plastic kind. He would have been up there before this, but it has taken him time to play his delightful trick on his constituents. That of course is pure amusement; but when once his effect has been well produced he 'll get back to business, and his business will be a very different matter from Miriam's. Imagine him writing her advertisements, living on her money, adding up her profits, having rows and recriminations with her agent, carrying her shawl, spending his days in her rouge-pot. The right man for that, if she must have one, will turn up. 'Pour le mariage, non.' She is n't wholly an idiot; she really, for a woman, quite sees things as they are."

As Peter had not crossed the street and left Gabriel planted he now suffered the extremity of irritation. But descrying in the dim vista of the Edgware Road

a vague and vigilant hansom he waved his stick with eagerness and with the abrupt declaration that, feeling tired, he must drive the rest of his way. He offered Nash, as he entered the vehicle, no seat, but this coldness was not reflected in the lucidity with which that master of every subject went on to affirm that there was of course a danger — the danger that in given circumstances Miriam would leave the stage.

"Leave it, you mean, for some man?"

"For the man we're talking about."

"For Nick Dormer?" Peter asked from his place in the cab, his paleness lighted by its lamps.

"If he should make it a condition. But why should he? why should he make *any* conditions? He's not an ass either. You see it would be a bore" — Nash kept it up while the hansom waited — "because if she were to do anything of that sort she'd make him pay for the sacrifice."

"Oh yes, she'd make him pay for the sacrifice," Peter blindly concurred.

"And then when he had paid she'd go back to her footlights," Gabriel developed from the curbstone as his companion closed the apron of the cab.

"I see — she'd go back — good-night," Peter returned. "*Please* go on!" he cried to the driver through the hole in the roof. And while the vehicle rolled away he growled to himself: "Of course she would — and quite right!"

XXXVII

"JUDGE for yourself when you get a chance," Nash had said to him; and as it turned out he was able to judge two days later, for he found his cousin in Balaklava Place on the Tuesday following his walk with their insufferable friend. He had not only stayed away from the theatre on the Monday evening — he regarded this as an achievement of some importance — but had not been near Miriam during the day. He had meant to absent himself from her company on Tuesday as well; a determination confirmed by the fact that the afternoon turned to rain. But when at ten minutes to five o'clock he jumped into a hansom and directed his course to Saint John's Wood it was precisely upon the weather that he shifted the responsibility of his behaviour.

Miriam had dined when he reached the villa, but she was lying down, unduly fatigued, before going to the theatre. Mrs. Rooth was, however, in the drawing-room with three gentlemen, in two of whom the fourth visitor was not startled to recognise Basil Dashwood and Gabriel Nash. Dashwood appeared to have become Miriam's brother-in-arms and a second child — a fonder one — to Mrs. Rooth; it had reached Peter on some late visit that the young actor had finally moved his lodgings into the quarter, making himself a near neighbour for all sorts of convenience. "Hang his convenience!" Peter thought,

perceiving that Mrs. Lovick's "Arty" was now altogether one of the family. Oh the family! — it was a queer one to be connected with: that consciousness was acute in Sherringham's breast to-day as he entered Mrs. Rooth's little circle. The place was filled with cigarette-smoke and there was a messy coffee-service on the piano, whose keys Basil Dashwood lightly touched for his own diversion. Nash, addressing the room of course, was at one end of a little sofa with his nose in the air, and Nick Dormer was at the other end, seated much at his ease and with a certain privileged appearance of having been there often before, though Sherringham knew he had not. He looked uncritical and very young, as rosy as a school-boy on a half-holiday. It was past five o'clock in the day, but Mrs. Rooth was not dressed; there was, however, no want of finish in her elegant attitude — the same relaxed grandeur (she seemed to let you understand) for which she used to be distinguished at Castle Nugent when the house was full. She toyed incongruously, in her unbuttoned wrapper, with a large tinsel fan which resembled a theatrical property.

It was one of the discomforts of Peter's position that many of those minor matters which are superficially at least most characteristic of the histrionic life had power to displease him, so that he was obliged constantly to overlook and condone and pretend. He disliked besmoked drawing-rooms and irregular meals and untidy arrangements; he could suffer from the vulgarity of Mrs. Rooth's apartments, the importunate photographs which gave on his nerves, the barbarous absence of signs of an orderly

domestic life, the odd volumes from the circulating library (you could see what they were — the very covers told you — at a glance) tumbled about under smeary cups and glasses. He had n't waited till now to feel it "rum" that fate should have let him in for such contacts; but as he stood before his hostess and her companions he wondered perhaps more than ever why he should. Her companions somehow, who were not responsible, did n't keep down his wonder; which was particularly odd, since they were not superficially in the least of Bohemian type. Almost the first thing that struck him, as happened, in coming into the room, was the fresh fact of the high good looks of his cousin, a gentleman, to one's taste and for one's faith, in a different enough degree from the stiff-collared conversible Dashwood. Peter did n't hate Nick for being of so fine an English grain; he knew rather the brush of a new wave of annoyance at Julia's stupid failure to get on with him under that good omen.

It was his first encounter with the late member for Harsh since his arrival in London: they had been on one side and the other so much taken up with their affairs. Since their last meeting Nick had, as we know, to his kinsman's perception, really put on a new character: he had done the finest stroke of business in the quietest way. This had made him a presence to be counted with, and in just the sense in which poor Peter desired least to count. Poor Peter, after his somersault in the blue, had just lately been much troubled; he was ravaged by contending passions; he paid every hour in a torment of unrest for

what was false in his position, the impossibility of keeping the presentable parts of his character together, the opposition of interest and desire. Nick, his junior and a lighter weight, had settled *his* problem and showed no wounds; there was something impertinent and mystifying in it. Yet he looked, into the bargain, too innocently young and happy, and too careless and modest and amateurish, to figure as a rival or even as the genius he was apparently going to try to be — the genius that the other day, in the studio there with Biddy, Peter had got a startled glimpse of his power to become. Julia's brother would have liked to be aware of grounds of resentment, to be able to hold she had been badly treated or that Nick was basely fatuous, for in that case he might have had the resource of taking offence. But where was the outrage of his merely being liked by a woman in respect to whom one had definitely denied one's self the luxury of pretensions, especially if, as the wrong-doer, he had taken no action in the matter? It could scarcely be called wrong-doing to call, casually, on an afternoon when the lady did n't seem to be there. Peter could at any rate rejoice that Miriam did n't; and he proposed to himself suggesting to Nick after a little that they should adjourn together — they had such interesting things to talk about. Meanwhile Nick greeted him with a friendly freedom in which he could read neither confusion nor defiance. Peter was reassured against a danger he believed he did n't recognise and puzzled by a mystery he flattered himself he had n't heeded. And he was still more ashamed of being reassured than of being puzzled.

It must be recorded that Miriam's absence from the scene was not prolonged. Nick, as Sherringham gathered, had been about a quarter of an hour in the house, which would have given her, gratified by his presence, due time to array herself to come down to him. At all events she was in the room, prepared apparently to go to the theatre, very shortly after one of her guests had become sensible of how glad he was she was out of it. Familiarity had never yet cured him of a certain tremor of expectation, and even of suspense, in regard to her entrances; a flutter caused by the simple circumstance of her infinite variety. To say she was always acting would too much convey that she was often fatiguing; since her changing face affected this particular admirer at least not as a series of masks, but as a response to perceived differences, an intensity of that perception, or still more as something richly constructional, like the shifting of the scene in a play or like a room with many windows. The image she was to project was always incalculable, but if her present denied her past and declined responsibility for her future it made a good thing of the hour and kept the actual peculiarly fresh. This time the actual was a bright gentle graceful smiling young woman in a new dress, eager to go out, drawing on fresh gloves, who looked as if she were about to step into a carriage and — it was Gabriel Nash who thus formulated her physiognomy — do a lot of London things.

The young woman had time to spare, however, and she sat down and talked and laughed and presently gave, as seemed to Peter, a deeper glow to the

tawdry little room, which could do for others if it had to do for her. She described herself as in a state of nervous muddle, exhausted, blinded, *abrutie*, with the rehearsals of the forthcoming piece — the first night was close at hand, and it was going to be of a vileness: they would all see! — but there was no correspondence between this account of the matter and her present bravery of mood. She sent her mother away — to "put on some clothes or something" — and, left alone with the visitors, went to a long glass between the windows, talking always to Nick Dormer, and revised and rearranged a little her own attire. She talked to Nick, over her shoulder, and to Nick only, as if he were the guest to recognise and the others did n't count. She broke out at once on his having thrown up his seat, wished to know if the strange story told her by Mr. Nash were true — that he had knocked all the hopes of his party into pie.

Nick took it any way she liked and gave a pleasant picture of his party's ruin, the critical condition of public affairs: he was as yet clearly closed to contrition or shame. The pilgrim from Paris, before Miriam's entrance, had not, in shaking hands with him, made even a roundabout allusion to his odd "game"; he felt he must somehow show good taste — so English people often feel — at the cost of good manners. But he winced on seeing how his scruples had been wasted, and was struck with the fine jocose direct turn of his kinsman's conversation with the young actress. It was a part of her unexpectedness that she took the heavy literal view of Nick's behaviour;

declared frankly, though without ill nature, that she had no patience with his mistake. She was horribly disappointed — she had set her heart on his being a great statesman, one of the rulers of the people and the glories of England. What was so useful, what was so noble? — how it belittled everything else! She had expected him to wear a cordon and a star some day — acquiring them with the greatest promptitude — and then to come and see her in her *loge:* it would look so particularly well. She talked after the manner of a lovely Philistine, except perhaps when she expressed surprise at hearing — hearing from Gabriel Nash — that in England gentlemen accoutred with those emblems of their sovereign's esteem did n't so far forget themselves as to stray into the dressing-rooms of actresses. She admitted after a moment that they were quite right and the dressing-rooms of actresses nasty places; but she was sorry, for that was the sort of thing she had always figured in a corner — a distinguished man, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders, admiring the smallness of a satin shoe and saying witty things. Nash was convulsed with hilarity at this — such a vision of the British political hero. Coming back from the glass and making that critic give her his place on the sofa, she seated herself near Nick and continued to express her regret at his perversity.

"They all say that — all the charming women, but I should n't have looked for it from you," Nick replied. "I've given you such an example of what I can do in another line."

"Do you mean my portrait? Oh I've got it, with

your name and 'M. P.' in the corner, and that's precisely why I'm content. 'M. P.' in the corner of a picture is delightful, but I want to break the mould: I don't in the least insist on your giving specimens to others. And the artistic life, when you can lead another — if you 've any alternative, however modest — is a very poor business. It comes last in dignity — after everything else. Ain't I up to my eyes in it and don't I truly know?"

"You talk like my broken-hearted mother," said Nick.

"Does she hate it so intensely?"

"She has the darkest ideas about it — the wildest theories. I can't imagine where she gets them; partly I think from a general conviction that the 'æsthetic' — a horrible insidious foreign disease — is eating the healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!) and partly from the charming pictures in *Punch* and the clever satirical articles, pointing at mysterious depths of contamination, in the other weekly papers. She believes there's a dreadful coterie of uncannily artful and desperately refined people who wear a kind of loose faded uniform and worship only beauty — which is a fearful thing; that Gabriel has introduced me to it; that I now spend all my time in it, and that for its sweet sake I've broken the most sacred vows. Poor Gabriel, who, so far as I can make out, is n't in any sort of society, however bad!"

"But I'm uncannily artful," Nash objected, "and though I can't afford the uniform — I believe you get it best somewhere in South Audley Street — I do

worship beauty. I really think it's me the weekly papers mean."

"Oh I've read the articles — I know the sort!" said Basil Dashwood.

Miriam looked at him. "Go and see if the brougham's there — I ordered it early."

Dashwood, without moving, consulted his watch. "It is n't time yet — I know more about the brougham than you. I've made a ripping good arrangement for her stable — it really costs her nothing," the young actor continued confidentially to Peter, near whom he had placed himself.

"Your mother's quite right to be broken-hearted," Miriam declared, "and I can imagine exactly what she has been through. I should like to talk with her — I should like to see her." Nick showed on this easy amusement, reminding her she had talked to him while she sat for her portrait in quite the opposite sense, most helpfully and inspiringly; and Nash explained that she was studying the part of a political duchess and wished to take observations for it, to work herself into the character. The girl might in fact have been a political duchess as she sat, her head erect and her gloved hands folded, smiling with aristocratic dimness at Nick. She shook her head with stately sadness; she might have been trying some effect for Mary Stuart in Schiller's play. "I've changed since that. I want you to be the grandest thing there is — the counsellor of kings."

Peter wondered if it possibly were n't since she had met his sister in Nick's studio that she had changed, if perhaps she had n't seen how it might

give Julia the sense of being more effectually routed to know that the woman who had thrown the bomb was one who also tried to keep Nick in the straight path. This indeed would involve an assumption that Julia might know, whereas it was perfectly possible she might n't and more than possible that if she should she would n't care. Miriam's essential fondness for trying different ways was always there as an adequate reason for any particular way; a truth which, however, sometimes only half-prevented the particular way from being vexatious to a particular observer.

"Yet after all who 's more æsthetic than you and who goes in more for the beautiful?" Nick asked. "You 're never so beautiful as when you pitch into it."

"Oh I 'm an inferior creature, of an inferior sex, and I've to earn my bread as I can. I'd give it all up in a moment, my odious trade — for an inducement."

"And pray what do you mean by an inducement?" Nick demanded.

"My dear fellow, she means you — if you'll give her a permanent engagement to sit for you!" Gabriel volunteered. "What singularly crude questions you ask!"

"I like the way she talks," Mr. Dashwood derisively said, "when I gave up the most brilliant prospects, of very much the same kind as Mr. Dormer's, expressly to go on the stage."

"You 're an inferior creature too," Miriam promptly pronounced.

"Miss Rooth's very hard to satisfy," Peter ob-

served at this. "A man of distinction, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders, in the corner of her *loge* — she has such a personage ready made to her hand and she does n't so much as look at him. Am *I* not an inducement? Have n't I offered you a permanent engagement?"

"Your orders — where are your orders?" she returned with a sweet smile, getting up.

"I shall be a minister next year and an ambassador before you know it. Then I shall stick on everything that can be had."

"And they call *us* mountebanks!" cried the girl. "I've been so glad to see you again — do you want another sitting?" she went on to Nick as if to take leave of him.

"As many as you'll give me — I shall be grateful for all," he made answer. "I should like to do you as you are at present. You're totally different from the woman I painted — you're wonderful."

"The Comic Muse!" she laughed. "Well, you must wait till our first nights are over — I'm *sur les dents* till then. There's everything to do and I've to do it all. That fellow's good for nothing, for nothing but domestic life" — and she glanced at Basil Dashwood. "He has n't an idea — not one you'd willingly tell of him, though he's rather useful for the stables. We've got stables now — or we try to look as if we had: Dashwood's ideas are *de cette force*. In ten days I shall have more time."

"The Comic Muse? Never, never," Peter protested. "You're not to go smirking through the age and down to posterity — I'd rather see you as

Medusa crowned with serpents. That's what you look like when you look best."

"That's consoling — when I've just bought a lovely new bonnet, all red roses and bows. I forgot to tell you just now that when you're an ambassador you may propose anything you like," Miriam went on. "But forgive me if I make that condition. Seriously speaking, come to me glittering with orders and I shall probably succumb. I can't resist stars and garters. Only you must, as you say, have them all. I *don't* like to hear Mr. Dormer talk the slang of the studio — like that phrase just now: it *is* a fall to a lower state. However, when one's low one must crawl, and I'm crawling down to the Strand. Dashwood, see if mamma's ready. If she is n't I decline to wait; you must bring her in a hansom. I'll take Mr. Dormer in the brougham; I want to talk with Mr. Dormer; he must drive with me to the theatre. His situation's full of interest." Miriam led the way out of the room as she continued to chatter, and when she reached the house-door with the four men in her train the carriage had just drawn up at the garden-gate. It appeared that Mrs. Rooth was not ready, and the girl, in spite of a remonstrance from Nick, who had a sense of usurping the old lady's place, repeated her injunction that she should be brought on in a cab. Miriam's gentlemen hung about her at the gate, and she insisted on Nick's taking his seat in the brougham and taking it first. Before she entered she put her hand out to Peter and, looking up at him, held his own kindly. "Dear old master, are n't you coming to-night? I miss you when you're not there."

"Don't go — don't go — it's too much," Nash freely declared.

"She *is* wonderful," said Mr. Dashwood, all expert admiration; "she *has* gone into the rehearsals tooth and nail. But nothing takes it out of her."

"Nothing puts it into you, my dear!" Miriam returned. Then she pursued to Peter: "You're the faithful one — you're the one I count on." He was not looking at her; his eyes travelled into the carriage, where they rested on Nick Dormer, established on the further seat with his face turned toward the further window. He was the one, faithful or no, counted on or no, whom a charming woman had preferred to carry off, and there was clear triumph for him in that fact. Yet it pleased, it somewhat relieved, his kinsman to see his passivity as not a little foolish. Miriam noted something of this in Peter's eyes, for she exclaimed abruptly "Don't kill him — he does n't care for me!" With which she passed into the carriage and let it roll away.

Peter stood watching it till he heard Dashwood again beside him. "You would n't believe what I make him do the whole thing for — a little rascal I know."

"Good-bye; take good care of Mrs. Rooth," said Gabriel Nash, waving a bland farewell to the young actor. He gave a smiling survey of the heavens and remarked to Sherringham that the rain had stopped. Was he walking, was he driving, should they be going in the same direction? Peter cared little about his direction and had little account of it to give; he simply moved away in silence and with Gabriel at his

side. This converser was partly an affliction to him; indeed the fact that he could n't only make light of him added to the oppression. It was just to him nevertheless to note that he could hold his peace occasionally: he had for instance this afternoon taken little part in the talk at Balaklava Place. Peter greatly disliked to speak to him of Miriam, but he liked Nash himself to make free with her, and even liked him to say such things as might be a little viciously and unguardedly contradicted. He was not, however, moved to gainsay something dropped by his companion, disconnectedly, at the end of a few minutes; a word to the effect that she was after all the best-natured soul alive. All the same, Nash added, it would n't do for her to take possession of a nice life like Nick's; and he repeated that for his part he would never allow it. It would be on his conscience to interfere. To which Peter returned disingenuously that they might all do as they liked — it did n't matter a button to *him*. And with an effort to carry off that comedy he changed the subject.

XXXVIII

He would n't for a moment have admitted that he was jealous of his old comrade, but would almost have liked to be accused of it: for this would have given him a chance he rather lacked and missed, the right occasion to declare with plausibility that motives he could n't avow had no application to his case. How could a man be jealous when he was not a suitor? how could he pretend to guard a property which was neither his own nor destined to become his own? There could be no question of loss when one had nothing at stake, and no question of envy when the responsibility of possession was exactly what one prayed to be delivered from. The measure of one's susceptibility was one's pretensions, and Peter was not only ready to declare over and over again that, thank God, he had none: his spiritual detachment was still more complete — he literally suffered from the fact that nobody appeared to care to hear him say it. He connected an idea of virtue and honour with his attitude, since surely it was a high case of conduct to have quenched a personal passion for the good of the public service. He had gone over the whole question at odd irrepressible hours; he had returned, spiritually speaking, the buffet administered to him all at once, that day in Rosedale Road, by the spectacle of the *crânerie* with which Nick could let worldly glories slide. Resolution for reso-

lution he preferred after all another sort, and his own *crânerie* would be shown in the way he should stick to his profession and stand up for British interests. If Nick had leaped over a wall he would leap over a river. The course of his river was already traced and his loins were already girded. Thus he was justified in holding that the measure of a man's susceptibility was a man's attitude: that was the only thing he was bound to give an account of.

He was perpetually giving an account of it to his own soul in default of other listeners. He was quite angry at having tasted a sweetness in Miriam's assurance at the carriage-door, bestowed indeed with very little solemnity, that Nick did n't care for her. Wherein did it concern him that Nick cared for her or that Nick did n't? Wherein did it signify to him that Gabriel Nash should have taken upon himself to disapprove of a union between the young actress and the young painter and to frustrate an accident that might perhaps prove fortunate? For those had also been cooling words at the hour, though Peter blushed on the morrow to think that he felt in them anything but Nash's personal sublimity. He was ashamed of having been refreshed, and refreshed by so sickly a draught — it being all his theory that he was not in a fever. As for keeping an eye on Nick, it would soon become clear to that young man and that young man's charming friend that he had quite other uses for his eyes. The pair, with Nash to help, might straighten out their complications according to their light. He would never speak to Nick of Miriam; he felt indeed just now as if he should never speak to

Nick of anything. He had traced the course of his river, as I say, and the real proof would be in the way he should, clearing the air, land on the opposite bank. It was a case for action — for vigorous unmistakeable action. He had done very little since his arrival in London but moon round a *fille de théâtre* who was taken up partly, though she bluffed it off, with another man, and partly with arranging new petticoats for a beastly old "poetic drama"; but this little waste of time should instantly be made up. He had given himself a definite rope, and he had danced to the end of his rope, and now he would dance back. That was all right — so right that Peter could only express to himself how right it was by whistling with extravagance.

He whistled as he went to dine with a great personage the day after his meeting with Nick in Balaklava Place; a great personage to whom he had originally paid his respects — it was high time — the day before that meeting, the previous Monday. The sense of omissions to repair, of a superior line to take, perhaps made him study with more zeal to please the personage, who gave him ten minutes and asked him five questions. A great many doors were successively opened before any palpitating pilgrim who was about to enter the presence of this distinguished man; but they were discreetly closed again behind Sherringham, and I must ask the reader to pause with me at the nearer end of the momentary vista. This particular pilgrim fortunately felt he could count on recognition not only as a faithful if obscure official in the great hierarchy, but as a clever young man who

happened to be connected by blood with people his lordship had intimately known. No doubt it was simply as the clever young man that Peter received the next morning, from the dispenser of his lordship's hospitality, a note asking him to dine on the morrow. Such cards had come to him before, and he had always obeyed their call; he did so at present, however, with a sense of unusual intention. In due course his intention was translated into words; before the gentlemen left the dining-room he respectfully asked his noble host for some further brief and benevolent hearing.

"What is it you want? Tell me now," the master of his fate replied, motioning to the rest of the company to pass out and detaining him where they stood.

Peter's excellent training covered every contingency: he could always be as concise or as diffuse as the occasion required. Even he himself, however, was surprised at the quick felicity of the terms in which he was conscious of conveying that, were it compatible with higher conveniences, he should extremely like to be transferred to duties in a more distant quarter of the globe. Indeed, fond as he was of thinking himself a man of emotions controlled by civility, it is not impossible that a greater candour than he knew glimmered through Peter's expression and trembled through his tone as he presented this petition. He had aimed at a good manner in presenting it, but perhaps the best of the effect produced for his interlocutor was just where it failed, where it confessed a secret that the highest diplomacy would have guarded. Sherringham remarked to the min-

ister that he did n't care in the least where the place might be, nor how little coveted a post; the further away the better, and the climate did n't matter. He would only prefer of course that there should be really something to do, though he would make the best of it even if there were not. He stopped in time, or at least thought he did, not to betray his covertly seeking relief from minding his having been jilted in a flight to latitudes unfavourable to human life. His august patron gave him a sharp look which for a moment seemed the precursor of a sharper question; but the moment elapsed and the question failed to come. This considerate omission, characteristic of a true man of the world and representing quick guesses and still quicker indifferences, made our gentleman from that moment his lordship's ardent partisan. What did come was a good-natured laugh and the exclamation: "You know there are plenty of swamps and jungles, if you want that sort of thing." Peter replied that it was very much that sort of thing he did want; whereupon his chief continued: "I'll see — I'll see. If anything turns up you shall hear."

Something turned up the very next day: our young man, taken at his word, found himself indebted to the postman for a note of concise intimation that the high position of minister to the smallest of Central American republics would be apportioned him. The republic, though small, was big enough to be "shaky," and the position, though high, not so exalted that there were not much greater altitudes above it to which it was a stepping-stone. Peter, quite ready to take one thing with another, rejoiced

at his easy triumph, reflected that he must have been even more noticed at headquarters than he had hoped, and, on the spot, consulting nobody and waiting for nothing, signified his unqualified acceptance of the place. Nobody with a grain of sense would have advised him to do anything else. It made him happier than he had supposed he should ever be again; it made him feel professionally in the train, as they said in Paris; it was serious, it was interesting, it was exciting, and his imagination, letting itself loose into the future, began once more to scale the crowning eminence. It was very simple to hold one's course if one really tried, and he blessed the variety of peoples. Further communications passed, the last enjoining on him to return to Paris for a short interval a week later, after which he would be advised of the date for his proceeding to his remoter duties.

XXXIX

THE next thing he meanwhile did was to call with his news on Lady Agnes Dormer; it is not unworthy of note that he took on the other hand no step to make his promotion known to Miriam Rooth. To render it probable he should find his aunt he went at the luncheon-hour; and she was indeed on the point of sitting down to that repast with Grace. Biddy was not at home — Biddy was never at home now, her mother said: she was always at Nick's place, she spent her life there, she ate and drank there, she almost slept there. What she contrived to do there for so many hours and what was the irresistible spell Lady Agnes could n't pretend she had succeeded in discovering. She spoke of this baleful resort only as "Nick's place," and spoke of it at first as little as possible. She judged highly probable, however, that Biddy would come in early that afternoon: there was something or other, some common social duty, she had condescended to promise she would perform with Grace. Poor Lady Agnes, whom Peter found somehow at once grim and very prostrate — she assured her nephew her nerves were all gone — almost abused her younger daughter for two minutes, having evidently a deep-seated need of abusing some one. I must yet add that she did n't wait to meet Grace's eye before recovering, by a rapid gyration, her view of the possibilities of things — those possi-

bilities from which she still might squeeze, as a parent almost in despair, the drop that would sweeten her cup. "Dear child," she had the presence of mind to subjoin, "her only fault is after all that she adores her brother. She has a capacity for adoration and must always take her gospel from some one."

Grace declared to Peter that her sister would have stayed at home if she had dreamed he was coming, and Lady Agnes let him know that she had heard all about the hour he had spent with the poor child at Nick's place and about his extraordinary good nature in taking the two girls to the play. Peter lunched in Calcutta Gardens, spending an hour there which proved at first unexpectedly and, as seemed to him, unfairly dismal. He knew from his own general perceptions, from what Biddy had told him and from what he had heard Nick say in Balaklava Place, that his aunt would have been wounded by her son's apostasy; but it was not till he saw her that he appreciated the dark difference this young man's behaviour had made in the outlook of his family. Evidently that behaviour had sprung a dreadful leak in the great vessel of their hopes. These were things no outsider could measure, and they were none of an outsider's business; it was enough that Lady Agnes struck him really as a woman who had received her death-blow. She looked ten years older; she was white and haggard and tragic. Her eyes burned with a strange fitful fire that prompted one to conclude her children had better look out for her. When not filled with this unnatural flame they were suffused with comfortless tears; and altogether the

afflicted lady was, as he viewed her, very bad, a case for anxiety. It was because he had known she would be very bad that he had, in his kindness, called on her exactly in this manner; but he recognised that to undertake to be kind to her in proportion to her need might carry one very far. He was glad he had not himself a wronged mad mother, and he wondered how Nick could bear the burden of the home he had ruined. Apparently he did n't bear it very far, but had taken final convenient refuge in Rosedale Road.

Peter's judgement of his perverse cousin was considerably confused, and not the less so for the consciousness that he was perhaps just now not in the best state of mind for judging him at all. At the same time, though he held in general that a man of sense has always warrant enough *in* his sense for doing the particular thing he prefers, he could scarcely help asking himself whether, in the exercise of a virile freedom, it had been absolutely indispensable Nick should work such domestic woe. He admitted indeed that that was an anomalous figure for Nick, the worker of domestic woe. Then he saw that his aunt's grievance — there came a moment, later, when she asserted as much — was not quite what her recreant child, in Balaklava Place, had represented it — with questionable taste perhaps — to a mocking actress; was not a mere shocked quarrel with his adoption of a "low" career, or a horror, the old-fashioned horror, of the *louches* licences taken by artists under pretext of being conscientious: the day for this was past, and English society thought the brush and the fiddle as

good as anything else — with two or three exceptions. It was not what he had taken up but what he had put down that made the sorry difference, and the tragedy would have been equally great if he had become a wine-merchant or a horse-dealer. Peter had gathered at first that Lady Agnes would n't trust herself to speak directly of her trouble, and he had obeyed what he supposed the best discretion in making no allusion to it. But a few minutes before they rose from table she broke out, and when he attempted to utter a word of mitigation there was something that went to his heart in the way she returned: "Oh you don't know — you don't know!"

He felt Grace's eyes fixed on him at this instant in a mystery of supplication, and was uncertain as to what she wanted — that he should say something more to console her mother or should hurry away from the subject. Grace looked old and plain and — he had thought on coming in — rather cross, but she evidently wanted something. "You don't know," Lady Agnes repeated with a trembling voice, "you don't know." She had pushed her chair a little away from her place; she held her pocket-handkerchief pressed hard to her mouth, almost stuffed into it, and her eyes were fixed on the floor. She made him aware he did virtually know — know what towering piles of confidence and hope had been dashed to the earth. Then she finished her sentence unexpectedly — "You don't know what my life with my great husband was." Here on the other hand Peter was slightly at fault — he did n't exactly see what her life with her great husband had to do with it. What

was clear to him, however, was that they literally had looked for things all in the very key of that greatness from Nick. It was not quite easy to see why this had been the case — it had not been precisely Peter's own prefigurement. Nick appeared to have had the faculty of planting that sort of flattering faith in women; he had originally given Julia a tremendous dose of it, though she had since shaken off the effects.

"Do you really think he would have done such great things, politically speaking?" Peter risked. "Do you consider that the root of the matter was so essentially in him?"

His hostess had a pause, looking at him rather hard. "I only think what all his friends — all his father's friends — have thought. He was his father's son after all. No young man ever had a finer training, and he gave from the first repeated proof of the highest ability, the highest ambition. See how he got in everywhere. Look at his first seat — look at his second," Lady Agnes continued. "Look at what every one says at this moment."

"Look at all the papers!" said Grace. "Did you ever hear him speak?" she asked. And when Peter reminded her how he had spent his life in foreign lands, shut out from such pleasures, she went on: "Well, you lost something."

"It was very charming," said Lady Agnes quietly and poignantly.

"Of course he's charming, whatever he does," Peter returned. "He'll be a charming artist."

"Oh God help us!" the poor lady groaned, rising quickly.

"He won't — that's the worst," Grace amended. "It is n't as if he'd do things people would like. I've been to his place, and I never saw such a horrid lot of things — not at all clever or pretty."

Yet her mother, at this, turned upon her with sudden asperity. "You know nothing whatever about the matter!" Then she added for Peter that, as it happened, her children did have a good deal of artistic taste: Grace was the only one who was totally deficient in it. Biddy was very clever — Biddy really might learn to do pretty things. And anything the poor child could learn was now no more than her duty — there was so little knowing what the future had in store for them all.

"You think too much of the future — you take terribly gloomy views," said Peter, looking for his hat.

"What other views can one take when one's son has deliberately thrown away a fortune?"

"Thrown one away? Do you mean through not marrying —?"

"I mean through killing by his perversity the best friend he ever had."

Peter stared a moment; then with laughter: "Ah but Julia is n't dead of it!"

"I'm not talking of Julia," said his aunt with a good deal of majesty. "Nick is n't mercenary, and I'm not complaining of that."

"She means Mr. Carteret," Grace explained with all her competence. "He'd have done anything if Nick had stayed in the House."

"But he's not dead?"

"Charles Carteret's dying," said Lady Agnes — "his end's dreadfully near. He has been a sort of providence to us — he was Sir Nicholas's second self. But he won't put up with such insanity, such wickedness, and that chapter's closed."

"You mean he has dropped Nick out of his will?"

"Cut him off utterly. He has given him notice."

"The old scoundrel!" — Peter could n't keep this back. "But Nick will work the better for that — he'll depend on himself."

"Yes, and whom shall *we* depend on?" Grace spoke up.

"Don't be vulgar, for God's sake!" her mother ejaculated with a certain inconsequence.

"Oh leave Nick alone — he'll make a lot of money," Peter declared cheerfully, following his two companions into the hall.

"I don't in the least care if he does or not," said Lady Agnes. "You must come upstairs again — I've lots to say to you yet," she went on, seeing him make for his hat. "You must arrange to come and dine with us immediately; it's only because I've been so steeped in misery that I did n't write to you the other day — directly after you had called. We don't give parties, as you may imagine, but if you'll come just as we are, for old acquaintance' sake —"

"Just with Nick — if Nick will come — and dear Biddy," Grace interposed.

"Nick must certainly come, as well as dear Biddy, whom I hoped so much to find," Peter pronounced. "Because I'm going away — I don't know when I shall see them again."

"Wait with mamma. Biddy will come in now at any moment," Grace urged.

"You're going away?" said Lady Agnes, pausing at the foot of the stairs and turning her white face upon him. Something in her voice showed she had been struck by his own tone.

"I've had promotion and you must congratulate me. They're sending me out as minister to a little hot hole in Central America — six thousand miles away. I shall have to go rather soon."

"Oh I'm so glad!" Lady Agnes breathed. Still she paused at the foot of the stair and still she gazed.

"How very delightful — it will lead straight off to all sorts of other good things!" Grace a little coarsely commented.

"Oh I'm crawling up — I'm an excellency," Peter laughed.

"Then if you dine with us your excellency must have great people to meet you."

"Nick and Biddy — they're great enough."

"Come upstairs — come upstairs," said Lady Agnes, turning quickly and beginning to ascend.

"Wait for Biddy — I'm going out," Grace continued, extending her hand to her kinsman. "I shall see you again — not that you care; but good-bye now. Wait for Biddy," the girl repeated in a lower tone, fastening her eyes on his with the same urgent mystifying gleam he thought he had noted at luncheon.

"Oh I'll go and see her in Rosedale Road," he threw off.

"Do you mean to-day — now?"

"I don't know about to-day, but before I leave England."

"Well, she'll be in immediately," said Grace. "Good-bye to your excellency."

"Come up, Peter — *please* come up," called Lady Agnes from the top of the stairs.

He mounted and when he found himself in the drawing-room with her and the door closed she expressed her great interest in his fine prospects and position, which she wished to hear all about. She rang for coffee and indicated the seat he would find most comfortable: it shone before him for a moment that she would tell him he might if he wished light a cigar. For Peter had suddenly become restless — too restless to occupy a comfortable chair; he seated himself in it only to jump up again, and he went to the window, while he imparted to his hostess the very little he knew about his post, on hearing a vehicle drive up to the door. A strong light had just been thrown into his mind, and it grew stronger when, looking out, he saw Grace Dormer issue from the house in a hat and a jacket which had all the air of having been assumed with extraordinary speed. Her jacket was unbuttoned and her gloves still dangling from the hands with which she was settling her hat. The vehicle into which she hastily sprang was a hansom-cab which had been summoned by the butler from the doorstep and which rolled away with her after she had given an address.

"Where's Grace going in such a hurry?" he asked of Lady Agnes; to which she replied that she had n't

the least idea — her children, at the pass they had all come to, knocked about as they liked.

Well, he sat down again; he stayed a quarter of an hour and then he stayed longer, and during this time his appreciation of what she had in her mind gathered force. She showed him that precious quantity clearly enough, though she showed it by no clumsy, no voluntary arts. It looked out of her sombre conscious eyes and quavered in her preoccupied perfunctory tones. She took an extravagant interest in his future proceedings, the probable succession of events in his career, the different honours he would be likely to come in for, the salary attached to his actual appointment, the salary attached to the appointments that would follow — they would be sure to, would n't they? — and what he might reasonably expect to save. Oh he must save — Lady Agnes was an advocate of saving; and he must take tremendous pains and get on and be clever and fiercely ambitious: he must make himself indispensable and rise to the top. She was urgent and suggestive and sympathetic; she threw herself into the vision of his achievements and emoluments as if to appease a little the sore hunger with which Nick's treachery had left her. This was touching to her nephew, who did n't remain unmoved even at those more importunate moments when, as she fell into silence, fidgeting feverishly with a morsel of fancy-work she had plucked from a table, her whole presence became an intense repressed appeal to him. What that appeal would have been had it been uttered was: "Oh Peter, take little Biddy; oh my dear young friend, understand

your interests at the same time that you understand mine; be kind and reasonable and clever; save me all further anxiety and tribulation and accept my lovely faultless child from my hands."

That was what Lady Agnes had always meant, more or less, that was what Grace had meant, and they meant it with singular lucidity on the present occasion. Lady Agnes meant it so much that from one moment to another he scarce knew what she might do; and Grace meant it so much that she had rushed away in a hansom to fetch her sister from the studio. Grace, however, was a fool, for Biddy certainly would n't come. The news of his promotion had started them off, adding point to their idea of his being an excellent match; bringing home to them sharply the sense that if he were going away to strange countries he must take Biddy with him — that something at all events must be settled about Biddy before he went. They had suddenly begun to throb, poor things, with alarm at the ebbing hours.

Strangely enough the perception of all this had n't the effect of throwing him on the defensive and still less that of making him wish to bolt. When once he had made sure what was in the air he recognised a propriety, a real felicity in it; could n't deny that he was in certain ways a good match, since it was quite probable he would go far; and was even generous enough — as he had no fear of being materially dragged to the altar — to enter into the conception that he might offer some balm to a mother who had had a horrid disappointment. The feasibility of marrying Biddy was not exactly augmented by the

idea that his doing so would be a great offset to what Nick had made Lady Agnes suffer; but at least Peter did n't dislike his strenuous aunt so much as to wish to punish her for her nature. He was not afraid of her, whatever she might do; and though unable to grasp the practical relevancy of Biddy's being produced on the instant was willing to linger half an hour on the chance of successful production.

There was meanwhile moreover a certain contagion in Lady Agnes's appeal — it made him appeal sensibly to himself, since indeed, as it is time to say, the glass of our young man's spirit had been polished for that reflexion. It was only at this moment really that he became inwardly candid. While making up his mind that his only safety was in flight and taking the strong measure of a request for help toward it, he was yet very conscious that another and probably still more effectual safeguard — especially if the two should be conjoined — lay in the hollow of his hand. His sister's words in Paris had come back to him and had seemed still wiser than when uttered: "She'll save you disappointments; you'd know the worst that can happen to you, and it would n't be bad." Julia had put it into a nutshell — Biddy would probably save him disappointments. And then she was — well, she was Biddy. Peter knew better what that was since the hour he had spent with her in Rosedale Road. But he had brushed away the sense of it, though aware that in doing so he took only half-measures and was even guilty of a sort of fraud upon himself. If he was sincere in wishing to put a gulf between his future and that sad expanse of his past

and present over which Miriam had cast her shadow there was a very simple way to do so. He had dodged this way, dishonestly fixing on another which, taken alone, was far from being so good; but Lady Agnes brought him back to it. She held him in well-nigh confused contemplation of it, during which the safety, as Julia had called it, of the remedy wrought upon him as he would n't have believed beforehand, and not least to the effect of sweetening, of prettily colouring, the pill. It would be simple and it would deal with all his problems; it would put an end to all alternatives, which, as alternatives were otherwise putting an end to him, would be an excellent thing. It would settle the whole question of his future, and it was high time this should be settled.

Peter took two cups of coffee while he made out his future with Lady Agnes, but though he drank them slowly he had finished them before Biddy turned up. He stayed three quarters of an hour, saying to himself she would n't come — why should she come? Lady Agnes stooped to no avowal; she really stooped, so far as bald words went, to no part of the business; but she made him fix the next day save one for coming to dinner, and her repeated declaration that there would be no one else, not another creature but themselves, had almost the force of the supplied form for a promise to pay. In giving his word that he would come without fail, and not write the next day to throw them over for some function he should choose to dub obligatory, he felt quite as if he were putting his name to such a document. He went away at half-past three; Biddy of

course had n't come, and he had been sure she would n't. He could n't imagine what Grace's idea had been, nor what pretext she had put forward to her sister. Whatever these things Biddy had seen through them and hated them. Peter could but like her the more for that.

XL

Lady Agnes would doubtless have done better, in her own interest or in that of her child, to have secured his company for the very next evening. This she had indeed attempted, but her application of her thought had miscarried, Peter bethinking himself that he was importantly engaged. Her ladyship moreover could n't presume to answer for Nick, since after all they must of course *have* Nick, though, to tell the truth, the hideous truth, she and her son were scarcely on terms. Peter insisted on Nick, wished particularly to see him, and gave his hostess notice that he would make each of them forgive everything to the other. She returned that all her son had to forgive was her loving him more than her life, and she would have challenged Peter, had he allowed it, on the general ground of the comparative dignity of the two arts of painting portraits and governing nations. Our friend declined the challenge: the most he did was to intimate that he perhaps saw Nick more vividly as a painter than as a governor. Later he remembered vaguely something his aunt had said about their being a governing family.

He was going, by what he could ascertain, to a very queer climate and had many preparations to make. He gave his best attention to these, and for a couple of hours after leaving Lady Agnes rummaged London for books from which he might extract in-

formation about his new habitat. It made apparently no great figure in literature, and Peter could reflect that he was perhaps destined to find a salutary distraction in himself filling the void with a volume of impressions. After he had resigned himself to necessary ignorance he went into the Park. He treated himself to an afternoon or two there when he happened to drop upon London in summer — it refreshed his sense of the British interests he would have to stand up for. Moreover he had been hiding more or less, and now all that was changed and this was the simplest way not to hide. He met a host of friends, made his situation as public as possible and accepted on the spot a great many invitations; all subject, however, to the mental reservation that he should allow none of them to interfere with his being present the first night of Miriam's new venture. He was going to the equator to get away from her, but to repudiate the past with some decency of form he must show an affected interest, if he could muster none other, in an occasion that meant so much for her. The least intimate of her associates would do that, and Peter remembered how, at the expense of good manners, he had stayed away from her first appearance on any stage at all, He would have been shocked had he found himself obliged to go back to Paris without giving her at the imminent crisis the personal countenance she had so good a right to expect.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he went to Great Stanhope Street to dress for dinner and learn that a note awaiting him on the hall-table and which bore the marks of hasty dispatch had come three or four

hours before. It exhibited the signature of Miriam Rooth and let him know that she positively expected him at the theatre by eleven o'clock the next morning, for which hour a dress-rehearsal of the revived play had been hurriedly projected, the first night being now definitely fixed for the impending Saturday. She counted on his attendance at both ceremonies, but with particular reasons for wishing to see him in the morning. "I want you to see and judge and tell me," she said, "for my mind's like a flogged horse — it won't give another kick." It was for the Saturday he had made Lady Agnes his promise; he had thought of the possibility of the play in doing so, but had rested in the faith that, from valid symptoms, this complication would not occur till the following week. He decided nothing on the spot as to the conflict of occupations — it was enough to send Miriam three words to the effect that he would sooner perish than fail her on the morrow.

He went to the theatre in the morning, and the episode proved curious and instructive. Though there were twenty people in the stalls it bore little resemblance to those *répétitions générales* to which, in Paris, his love of the drama had often attracted him and which, taking place at night, in the theatre closed to the public, are virtually first performances with invited spectators. They were to his sense always settled and stately, rehearsals of the *première* even more than rehearsals of the play. The present occasion was less august; it was not so much a concert as a confusion of sounds, and it took audible and at times disputatious counsel with itself. It was

rough and frank and spasmodic, but was lively and vivid and, in spite of the serious character of the piece, often exceedingly droll: while it gave Sherringham, oddly enough, a more present sense than ever of bending over the hissing smoking sputtering caldron in which a palatable performance is stewed. He looked into the gross darkness that may result from excess of light; that is he understood how knocked up, on the eve of production, every one concerned in the preparation of a piece might be, with nerves overstretched and glasses blurred, awaiting the test and the response, the echo to be given back by the big receptive artless stupid delightful public. Peter's interest had been great in advance, and as Miriam since his arrival had taken him much into her confidence he knew what she intended to do and had discussed a hundred points with her. They had differed about some of them and she had always said: "Ah but wait till you see how I shall do it at the time!" That was usually her principal reason and her most convincing argument. She had made some changes at the last hour — she was going to do several things in another way. But she wanted a touchstone, wanted a fresh ear, and, as she told Sherringham when he went behind after the first act, that was why she had insisted on this private trial, to which a few fresh ears were to be admitted. They did n't want to allow it her, the theatre people, they were such a parcel of donkeys; but as to what she meant in general to insist on she had given them a hint she flattered herself they would n't soon forget.

She spoke as if she had had a great battle with

her fellow workers and had routed them utterly. It was not the first time he had heard her talk as if such a life as hers could only be a fighting life and of her frank measure of the fine uses of a faculty for making a row. She rejoiced she possessed this faculty, for she knew what to do with it; and though there might be a certain swagger in taking such a stand in advance when one had done the infinitely little she had yet done, she nevertheless trusted to the future to show how right she should have been in believing a pack of idiots would never hold out against her and would know they could n't afford to. Her assumption of course was that she fought for the light and the right, for the good way and the thorough, for doing a thing properly if one did it at all. What she had really wanted was the theatre closed for a night and the dress-rehearsal, put on for a few people, given instead of "Yolande." That she had not got, but she would have it the next time. She spoke as if her triumphs behind the scenes as well as before would go by leaps and bounds, and he could perfectly see, for the time, that she would drive her coadjutors in front of her like sheep. Her tone was the sort of thing that would have struck one as preposterous if one had n't believed in her; but if one did so believe it only seemed thrown in with the other gifts. How was she going to act that night and what could be said for such a hateful way of doing things? She thrust on poor Peter questions he was all unable to answer; she abounded in superlatives and tremendously strong objections. He had a sharper vision than usual of the queer fate, for a peaceable

man, of being involved in a life of so violent a rhythm: one might as well be hooked to a Catharine-wheel and whiz round in flame and smoke.

It had only been for five minutes, in the wing, amid jostling and shuffling and shoving, that they held this conference. Miriam, splendid in a brocaded anachronism, a false dress of the beginning of the century, and excited and appealing, imperious, reckless and good-humoured, full of exaggerated propositions, supreme determinations and comic irrelevancies, showed as radiant a young head as the stage had ever seen. Other people quickly surrounded her, and Peter saw that though she wanted, as she said, a fresh ear and a fresh eye she was liable to rap out to those who possessed these advantages that they did n't know what they were talking about. It was rather hard for her victims — Basil Dashwood let him into this, wonderfully painted and in a dress even more beautiful than Miriam's, that of a young dandy under Charles the Second: if you were not in the business you were one kind of donkey and if you *were* in the business you were another kind. Peter noted with a certain chagrin that Gabriel Nash had failed; he preferred to base his annoyance on that ground when the girl, after the remark just quoted from Dashwood, laughing and saying that at any rate the thing would do because it would just have to do, thrust vindictively but familiarly into the young actor's face a magnificent feather fan. "Is n't he too lovely," she asked, "and does n't he know how to do it?" Dashwood had the sense of costume even more than Peter had inferred or supposed he

minded, inasmuch as it now appeared he had gone profoundly into the question of what the leading lady was to wear. He had drawn patterns and hunted up stuffs, had helped her to try on her clothes, had bristled with ideas and pins. It would not have been quite clear, Peter's ground for resenting Nash's cynical absence; it may even be thought singular he should have missed him. At any rate he flushed a little when their young woman, of whom he enquired whether she had n't invited her oldest and dearest friend, made answer: "Oh he says he does n't like the kitchen-fire — he only wants the pudding!" It would have taken the kitchen-fire to account at that point for the red of Sherringham's cheek; and he was indeed uncomfortably heated by helping to handle, as he phrased it, the saucepans.

This he felt so much after he had returned to his seat, which he forbore to quit again till the curtain had fallen on the last act, that in spite of the high beauty of that part of the performance of which Miriam carried the weight there were moments when his relief overflowed into gasps, as if he had been scrambling up the bank of a torrent after an immersion. The girl herself, out in the open of her field to win, was of the incorruptible faith: she had been saturated to good purpose with the great spirit of Madame Carré. That was conspicuous while the play went on and she guarded the whole march with fagged piety and passion. Sherringham had never liked the piece itself; he held that as barbarous in form and false in feeling it did little honour to the British theatre; he despised many of the speeches,

pitied Miriam for having to utter them, and considered that, lighted by that sort of candle, the path of fame might very well lead nowhere.

When the ordeal was over he went behind again, where in the rose-coloured satin of the silly issue the heroine of the occasion said to him: "Fancy my having to drag through that other stuff to-night — the brutes!" He was vague about the persons designated in this allusion, but he let it pass: he had at the moment a kind of detached foreboding of the way any gentleman familiarly connected with her in the future would probably form the habit of letting objurgations and some other things pass. This had become indeed now a frequent state of mind with him; the instant he was before her, near her, next her, he found himself a helpless subject of the spell which, so far at least as he was concerned, she put forth by contact and of which the potency was punctual and absolute: the fit came on, as he said, exactly as some esteemed express-train on a great line bangs at a given moment into the station. At a distance he partly recovered himself — that was the encouragement for going to the shaky republic; but as soon as he entered her presence his life struck him as a thing disconnected from his will. It was as if he himself had been one thing and his behaviour another; he had shining views of this difference, drawn as they might be from the coming years — little illustrative scenes in which he saw himself in strange attitudes of resignation, always rather sad and still and with a slightly bent head. Such images should not have been inspiring, but it is a fact that they were

something to go upon. The gentleman with the bent head had evidently given up something that was dear to him, but it was exactly because he had got his price that he was there. "Come and see me three or four hours hence," Miriam said — "come, that is, about six. I shall rest till then, but I want particularly to talk with you. There will be no one else — not the tip of any tiresome nose. You'll do me good." So of course he drove up at six.

XLI

"I DON'T know; I have n't the least idea; I don't care; don't ask me!" — it was so he met some immediate appeal of her artistic egotism, some challenge of his impression of her at this and that moment. Had n't she frankly better give up such and such a point and return to their first idea, the one they had talked over so much? Peter replied to this that he disowned all ideas; that at any rate he should never have another as long as he lived, and that, so help him heaven, they had worried that hard bone more than enough.

"You're tired of me — yes, already," she said sadly and kindly. They were alone, her mother had not peeped out and she had prepared herself to return to the Strand. "However, it does n't matter and of course your head's full of other things. You must think me ravenously selfish —perpetually chattering about my vulgar shop. What will you have when one's a vulgar shop-girl? You used to like it, but then you were n't an ambassador."

"What do you know about my being a minister?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and showing sombre eyes. Sometimes he held her handsomer on the stage than off, and sometimes he reversed that judgement. The former of these convictions had held his mind in the morning, and it was now punctually followed by the other. As soon as she stepped on the

boards a great and special alteration usually took place in her — she was in focus and in her frame; yet there were hours too in which she wore her world's face before the audience, just as there were hours when she wore her stage face in the world. She took up either mask as it suited her humour. To-day he was seeing each in its order and feeling each the best.

"I should know very little if I waited for you to tell me — that's very certain," Miriam returned. "It's in the papers that you've got a high appointment, but I don't read the papers unless there's something in them about myself. Next week I shall devour them and think them, no doubt, inane. It was Basil told me this afternoon of your promotion — he had seen it announced somewhere. I'm delighted if it gives you more money and more advantages, but don't expect me to be glad that you're going away to some distant disgusting country."

"The matter has only just been settled and we've each been busy with our own affairs. But even if you had n't given me these opportunities," Peter went on, "I should have tried to see you to-day, to tell you my news and take leave of you."

"Take leave? Are n't you coming to-morrow?"

"Oh yes, I shall see you through that. But I shall rush away the very moment it's over."

"I shall be much better then — really I shall," the girl said.

"The better you are the worse you are."

She returned his frown with a beautiful charity. "If it would do you any good I'd be bad."

"The worse you are the better you are!" Peter laughed. "You're a devouring demon."

"Not a bit! It's you."

"It's I? I like that."

"It's you who make trouble, who are sore and suspicious and supersubtle, not taking things as they come and for what they are, but twisting them into misery and falsity. Oh I've watched you enough, my dear friend, and I've been sorry for you — and sorry as well for myself; for I'm not so taken up with myself, in the low greedy sense, as you think. I'm not such a base creature. I'm capable of gratitude, I'm capable of affection. One may live in paint and tinsel, but one is n't absolutely without a soul. Yes, I've got one," the girl went on, "though I do smear my face and grin at myself in the glass and practise my intonations. If what you're going to do is good for you I'm very glad. If it leads to good things, to honour and fortune and greatness, I'm enchanted. If it means your being away always, for ever and ever, of course that's serious. You know it — I need n't tell you — I regard you as I really don't regard any one else. I've a confidence in you — ah it's a luxury! You're a gentleman, *mon bon* — ah you're a gentleman! It's just that. And then you see, you understand, and that's a luxury too. You're a luxury altogether, dear clever Mr. Sherringham. Your being where I shall never see you is n't a thing I shall enjoy; I know that from the separation of these last months — after our beautiful life in Paris, the best thing that ever happened to me or that ever will. But if it's your career, if it's your happiness

— well, I can miss you and hold my tongue. I *can* be disinterested — I can!"

"What did you want me to come for?" he asked, all attentive and motionless. The same impression, the old impression, was with him again; the sense that if she was sincere it was sincerity of execution, if she was genuine it was the genuineness of doing it well. She did it so well now that this very fact was charming and touching. In claiming from him at the theatre this hour of the afternoon she had wanted honestly (the more as she had not seen him at home for several days) to go over with him once again, on the eve of the great night — it would be for her second creation the critics would lie so in wait; the first success might have been a fluke — some of her recurrent doubts: knowing from experience of what good counsel he often was, how he could give a worrying question its "settler" at the last. Then she had heard from Dashwood of the change in his situation, and that had really from one moment to the other made her think sympathetically of his preoccupations — led her open-handedly to drop her own. She was sorry to lose him and eager to let him know how good a friend she was conscious he had been to her. But the expression of this was already, at the end of a minute, a strange bedevilment: she began to listen to herself, to speak dramatically, to represent. She uttered the things she felt as if they were snatches of old playbooks, and really felt them the more because they sounded so well. This, however, did n't prevent their really being as good feelings as those of anybody else, and at the moment her friend, to still a rising

emotion — which he knew he should n't still — articulated the challenge I have just recorded, she had for his sensibility, at any rate, the truth of gentleness and generosity.

"There's something the matter with you, my dear — you're jealous," Miriam said. "You're jealous of poor Mr. Dormer. That's an example of the way you tangle everything up. Lord, he won't hurt you, nor me either!"

"He can't hurt me, certainly," Peter returned, "and neither can you; for I've a nice little heart of stone and a smart new breastplate of iron. The interest I take in you is something quite extraordinary; but the most extraordinary thing in it is that it's perfectly prepared to tolerate the interest of others."

"The interest of others need n't trouble it much!' Miriam declared. "If Mr. Dormer has broken off his marriage to such an awfully fine woman — for she's that, your swell of a sister — it is n't for a ranting wretch like me. He's kind to me because that's his nature and he notices me because that's his business; but he's away up in the clouds — a thousand miles over my head. He has got something 'on,' as they say; he's in love with an idea. I think it's a shocking bad one, but that's his own affair. He's quite *exalté;* living on nectar and ambrosia — what he has to spare for us poor crawling things on earth is only a few dry crumbs. I did n't even ask him to come to rehearsal. Besides, he thinks you're in love with me and that it would n't be honourable to cut in. He's capable of that — is n't it charming?"

"If he were to relent and give up his scruples would you marry him?" Peter asked.

"Mercy, how you chatter about 'marrying'!" the girl laughed. "C'est la maladie anglaise — you've all got it on the brain."

"Why I put it that way to please you," he explained. "You complained to me last year precisely that this was not what seemed generally wanted."

"Oh last year!" — she made nothing of that. Then differently, "Yes, it's very tiresome!" she conceded.

"You told me moreover in Paris more than once that you would n't listen to anything but that."

"Well," she declared, "I won't, but I shall wait till I find a husband who's charming enough and bad enough. One who'll beat me and swindle me and spend my money on other women — that's the sort of man for me. Mr. Dormer, delightful as he is, does n't come up to that."

"You'll marry Basil Dashwood." He spoke it with conviction.

"Oh 'marry'? — call it marry if you like. That's what poor mother threatens me with — she lives in dread of it."

"To this hour," he mentioned, "I have n't managed to make out what your mother wants. She has so many ideas, as Madame Carré said."

"She wants me to be some sort of tremendous creature — all her ideas are reducible to that. What makes the muddle is that she is n't clear about the creature she wants most. A great actress or a great lady — sometimes she inclines for one and sometimes for the other, but on the whole persuading herself

that a great actress, if she'll cultivate the right people, may *be* a great lady. When I tell her that won't do and that a great actress can never be anything but a great vagabond, then the dear old thing has tantrums, and we have scenes — the most grotesque: they'd make the fortune, for a subject, of some play-writing rascal, if he had the wit to guess them; which, luckily for us perhaps he never will. She usually winds up by protesting — *devinez un peu quoi!*" Miriam added. And as her companion professed his complete inability to divine: "By declaring that rather than take it that way I must marry *you*."

"She's shrewder than I thought," Peter returned. "It's the last of vanities to talk about, but I may state in passing that if you'd marry me you should be the greatest of all possible ladies."

She had a beautiful comical gape. "Lord o' mercy, my dear fellow, what natural capacity have I for that?"

"You're artist enough for anything. I shall be a great diplomatist: my resolution's firmly taken. I'm infinitely cleverer than you have the least idea of, and you shall be," he went on, "a great diplomatist's wife."

"And the demon, the devil, the devourer and destroyer, that you are so fond of talking about: what, in such a position, do you do with that element of my nature? Où le fourrez-vous?" she cried as with a real anxiety.

"I'll look after it, I'll keep it under. Rather perhaps I should say I'll bribe it and amuse it; I'll gorge it with earthly grandeurs."

"That's better," said Miriam; "for a demon

that's kept under is a shabby little demon. Don't let's be shabby." Then she added: "Do you really go away the beginning of next week?"

"Monday night if possible."

"Ah that's but to Paris. Before you go to your new post they must give you an interval here."

"I shan't take it — I'm so tremendously keen for my duties. I shall insist on going sooner. Oh," he went on, "I shall be concentrated now."

"I'll come and act there." She met it all — she was amused and amusing. "I've already forgotten what it was I wanted to discuss with you," she said — "it was some trumpery stuff. What I want to say now is only one thing: that it's not in the least true that because my life pitches me in every direction and mixes me up with all sorts of people — or rather with one sort mainly, poor dears! — I have n't a decent character, I have n't common honesty. Your sympathy, your generosity, your patience, your precious suggestions, our dear sweet days last summer in Paris, I shall never forget. You're the best — you're different from all the others. Think of me as you please and make profane jokes about my mating with a disguised 'Arty' — I shall think of *you* only in one way. I've a great respect for you. With all my heart I hope you'll be a great diplomatist. God bless you, dear clever man."

She got up as she spoke and in so doing glanced at the clock — a movement that somehow only added to the noble gravity of her discourse: she was considering his time so much more than her own. Sherringham, at this, rising too, took out his watch and

stood a moment with his eyes bent upon it, though without in the least seeing what the needles marked. "You'll have to go, to reach the theatre at your usual hour, won't you? Let me not keep you. That is let me keep you only long enough just to say this, once for all, as I shall never speak of it again. I'm going away to save myself," he frankly said, planted before her and seeking her eyes with his own. "I ought to go, no doubt, in silence, in decorum, in virtuous submission to hard necessity — without asking for credit or sympathy, without provoking any sort of scene or calling attention to my fortitude. But I can't — upon my soul I can't. I can go, I can see it through, but I can't hold my tongue. I want you to know all about it, so that over there, when I'm bored to death, I shall at least have the exasperatingly vain consolation of feeling that you do know — and that it does neither you nor me any good!"

He paused a moment; on which, as quite vague, she appealed. "That I 'do know' what?"

"That I've a consuming passion for you and that it's impossible."

"Oh impossible, my friend!" she sighed, but with a quickness in her assent.

"Very good; it interferes, the gratification of it would interfere fatally, with the ambition of each of us. Our ambitions are inferior and odious, but we're tied fast to them."

"Ah why ain't we simple?" she quavered as if all touched by it. "Why ain't we of the people — *comme tout le monde* — just a man and a girl liking each other?"

He waited a little — she was so tenderly mocking, so sweetly ambiguous. "Because we're precious asses! However, I'm simple enough, after all, to care for you as I've never cared for any human creature. You have, as it happens, a personal charm for me that no one has ever approached, and from the top of your splendid head to the sole of your theatrical shoe (I could go down on my face — there, abjectly — and kiss it!) every inch of you is dear and delightful to me. Therefore good-bye."

She took this in with wider eyes: he had put the matter in a way that struck her. For a moment, all the same, he was afraid she would reply as on the confessed experience of so many such tributes, handsome as this one was. But she was too much moved — the pure colour that had risen to her face showed it — to have recourse to this particular facility. She was moved even to the glimmer of tears, though she gave him her hand with a smile. "I'm so glad you've said all that, for from you I know what it means. Certainly it's better for you to go away. Of course it's all wrong, is n't it? — but that's the only thing it can be: therefore it's all right, is n't it? Some day when we're both great people we'll talk these things over; then we shall be quiet, we shall be rich, we shall be at peace — let us hope so at least — and better friends than others about us will know." She paused, smiling still, and then said while he held her hand: "Don't, *don't* come to-morrow night."

With this she attempted to draw her hand away, as if everything were settled and over; but the effect of her movement was that, as he held her tight, he

was simply drawn toward her and close to her. The effect of this, in turn, was that, releasing her only to possess her the more completely, he seized her in his arms and, breathing deeply "I love you, you know," clasped her in a long embrace. His demonstration and her conscious sufferance, almost equally liberal, so sustained themselves that the door of the room had time to open slowly before either had taken notice. Mrs. Rooth, who had not peeped in before, peeped in now, becoming in this manner witness of an incident she could scarce have counted on. The unexpected indeed had for Mrs. Rooth never been an insuperable element in things; it was her position in general to be too acquainted with all the passions for any crude surprise. As the others turned round they saw her stand there and smile, and heard her ejaculate with wise indulgence: "Oh you extravagant children!"

Miriam brushed off her tears, quickly but unconfusedly. "He's going away, the wretch; he's bidding us farewell."

Peter — it was perhaps a result of his acute agitation — laughed out at the "us" (he had already laughed at the charge of puerility) and Mrs. Rooth went on: "Going away? Ah then I must have one too!" She held out both her hands, and Sherringham, stepping forward to take them, kissed her respectfully on each cheek, in the foreign manner, while she continued: "Our dear old friend — our kind gallant gentleman!"

"The gallant gentleman has been promoted to a great post — the proper reward of his gallantry,"

Miriam said. "He's going out as minister to some impossible place — where is it?"

"As minister — how very charming! We *are* getting on." And their companion languished up at him with a world of approval.

"Oh well enough. One must take what one can get," he answered.

"You'll get everything now, I'm sure, shan't you?" Mrs. Rooth asked with an inflexion that called back to him comically — the source of the sound was so different — the very vibrations he had heard the day before from Lady Agnes.

"He's going to glory and he'll forget all about us — forget he has ever known such low people. So we shall never see him again, and it's better so. Good-bye, good-bye," Miriam repeated; "the brougham must be there, but I won't take you. I want to talk to mother about you, and we shall say things not fit for you to hear. Oh I'll let you know what we lose — don't be afraid," she added to Mrs. Rooth. "He's the rising star of diplomacy."

"I knew it from the first — I know how things turn out for such people as you!" cried the old woman, gazing fondly at Sherringham. "But you don't mean to say you're not coming to-morrow night?"

"Don't — don't; it's great folly," Miriam interposed; "and it's quite needless, since you saw me to-day."

Peter turned from the mother to the daughter, the former of whom broke out to the latter: "Oh you dear rogue, to say one has *seen* you yet! You know

how you 'll come up to it — you 'll be beyond everything."

"Yes, I shall be there — certainly," Peter said, at the door, to Mrs. Rooth.

"Oh you dreadful goose!" Miriam called after him. But he went out without looking round at her.

BOOK SEVENTH

XLII

Nick Dormer had for the hour quite taken up his abode at his studio, where Biddy usually arrived after breakfast to give him news of the state of affairs in Calcutta Gardens and where many letters and telegrams were now addressed him. Among such missives, on the morning of the Saturday on which Peter Sherringham had promised to dine at the other house, was a note from Miriam Rooth, informing Nick that if he should n't telegraph to put her off she would turn up about half-past eleven, probably with her mother, for just one more sitting. She added that it was a nervous day for her and that she could n't keep still, so that it would really be very kind to let her come to him as a refuge. She wished to stay away from the theatre, where everything was now settled — or so much the worse for the others if it was n't — till the evening; in spite of which she should if left to herself be sure to go there. It would keep her quiet and soothe her to sit — he could keep her quiet (he was such a blessing that way!) at any time. Therefore she would give him two or three hours — or rather she would herself ask for them — if he did n't positively turn her from the door.

It had not been definite to Nick that he wanted another sitting at all for the slight work, as he held it to be, that Miriam had already helped him to achieve. He regarded this work as a mere light wind-

fall of the shaken tree: he had made what he could of it and would have been embarrassed to make more. If it was not finished this was because it was not finishable; at any rate he had said all he had to say in that particular phrase. The young man, in truth, was not just now in the highest spirits; his imagination had within two or three days become conscious of a check that he tried to explain by the idea of a natural reaction. Any decision or violent turn, any need of a new sharp choice in one's career, was upsetting, and, exaggerate that importance and one's own as little as one would, a deal of flurry could n't help attending, especially in the face of so much scandal, the horrid act, odious to one's modesty at the best, of changing one's clothes in the market-place. That made life not at all positively pleasant, yet decidedly thrilling, for the hour; and it was well enough till the thrill abated. When this occurred, as it inevitably would, the romance and the glow of the adventure were exchanged for the chill and the prose. It was to these latter elements he had waked up pretty wide on this particular morning; and the prospect was not appreciably fresher from the fact that he had warned himself in advance it would be dull. He had in fact known how dull it would be, but now he would have time to learn even better. A reaction was a reaction, but it was not after all a catastrophe. It would be a feature of his very freedom that he should ask himself if he had n't made a great mistake; this privilege would doubtless even remain within the limits of its nature in exposing him to hours of intimate conviction of his madness. But he would

live to retract his retractations — this was the first thing to bear in mind.

He was absorbed, even while he dressed, in the effort to achieve intelligibly to himself some such revolution when, by the first post, Miriam's note arrived. At first it did little to help his agility — it made him, seeing her æsthetic faith as so much stronger and simpler than his own, wonder how he should keep with her at her high level. Ambition, in her, was always on the rush, and she was not a person to conceive that others might in bad moments listen for the trumpet in vain. It would never have occurred to her that only the day before he had spent a part of the afternoon quite at the bottom of the hill. He had in fact turned into the National Gallery and had wandered about there for more than an hour, and it was just while he did so that the immitigable recoil had begun perversely to make itself felt. The perversity was all the greater from the fact that if the experience was depressing this was not because he had been discouraged beyond measure by the sight of the grand things that had been done — things so much grander than any that would ever bear his signature. That variation he was duly acquainted with and should know in abundance again. What had happened to him, as he passed on this occasion from Titian to Rubens and from Gainsborough to Rembrandt, was that he found himself calling the whole exhibited art into question. What was it after all at the best and why had people given it so high a place? Its weakness, its limits broke upon him; tacitly blaspheming he looked with a lustreless eye at the

palpable polished "toned" objects designed for suspension on hooks. That is he blasphemed if it were blasphemy to feel that as bearing on the energies of man they were a poor and secondary show. The human force producing them was so far from one of the greatest; their place was a small place and their connexion with the heroic life casual and slight. They represented so little great ideas, and it was great ideas that kept the world from chaos. He had incontestably been in much closer relation with them a few months before than he was to-day: it made up a great deal for what was false and hollow, what was merely personal, in "politics" that, were the idea greater or smaller, they could at their best so directly deal with it. The love of it had really been much of the time at the bottom of his impulse to follow them up; though this was not what he had most talked of with his political friends or even with Julia. No, political as Julia was, he had not conferred with her much about the idea. However, this might have been his own fault quite as much as hers, and she in fact took such things, such enthusiasms, for granted — there was an immense deal in every way that she took for granted. On the other hand he had often put forward this brighter side of the care for the public weal in his discussions with Gabriel Nash, to the end, it is true, of making that worthy scoff aloud at what he was pleased to term his hypocrisy. Gabriel maintained precisely that there were more ideas, more of those that man lived by, in a single room of the National Gallery than in all the statutes of Parliament. Nick had replied to this more than

once that the determination of what man did live by was required; to which Nash had retorted (and it was very rarely that he quoted Scripture) that it was at any rate not by bread and beans alone. The statutes of Parliament gave him bread and beans *tout au plus*.

Nick had at present no pretension of trying this question over again: he reminded himself that his ambiguity was subjective, as the philosophers said; the result of a mood which in due course would be at the mercy of another mood. It made him curse, and cursing, as a finality, lacked firmness — one had to drive in posts somewhere under. The greatest time to do one's work was when it did n't seem worth doing, for then one gave it a brilliant chance, that of resisting the stiffest test of all — the test of striking one as too bad. To do the most when there would be the least to be got by it was to be most in the spirit of high production. One thing at any rate was certain, Nick reflected: nothing on earth would induce him to change back again — not even if this twilight of the soul should last for the rest of his days. He hardened himself in his posture with a good conscience which, had they had a glimpse of it, would have made him still more diverting to those who already thought him so; and now, by a happy chance, Miriam suddenly supplied the bridge correcting the gap in his continuity. If he had made his sketch it was a proof he had done her, and that he had done her flashed upon him as a sign that she would be still more feasible. Art was *doing* — it came back to that — which politics in most cases were n't. He

thus, to pursue our image, planted his supports in the dimness beneath all cursing, and on the platform so improvised was able, in his relief, to dance. He sent out a telegram to Balaklava Place requesting his beautiful sitter by no manner of means to fail him. When his servant came back it was to usher into the studio Peter Sherringham, whom the man had apparently found at the door.

The hour was so early for general commerce that Nick immediately guessed his visitor had come on some rare errand; but this inference yielded to the reflexion that Peter might after all only wish to make up by present zeal for not having been near him before. He forgot that, as he had subsequently learned from Biddy, their foreign, or all but foreign, cousin had spent an hour in Rosedale Road, missing him there but pulling out Miriam's portrait, the day of his own last visit to Beauclere. These young men were not on a ceremonious footing and it was not in Nick's nature to keep a record of civilities rendered or omitted; nevertheless he had been vaguely conscious that during a stay in London elastic enough on Peter's part he and his kinsman had foregathered less than of yore. It was indeed an absorbing moment in the career of each, but even while recognising such a truth Nick judged it not impossible that Julia's brother might have taken upon himself to resent some suppositious failure of consideration for that lady; though this indeed would have been stupid and the newly-appointed minister (to he had forgotten where) did n't often make mistakes. Nick held that as he had treated Julia with studious gen-

erosity she had nothing whatever to visit on him — wherefore Peter had still less. It was at any rate none of that gentleman's business. There were only two abatements to disposing in a few frank words of all this: one of them Nick's general hatred of talking of his private affairs (a reluctance in which he and Peter were well matched); and the other a truth involving more of a confession — the subtle truth that the most definite and even most soothing result of the collapse of his engagement was, as happened, an unprecedented consciousness of freedom. Nick's observation was of a different sort from his cousin's; he noted much less the signs of the hour and kept throughout a looser register of life; nevertheless, just as one of our young men had during these days in London found the air peopled with personal influences, the concussion of human atoms, so the other, though only asking to live without too many questions and work without too many rubs, to be glad and sorry in short on easy terms, had become aware of a certain social tightness, of the fact that life is crowded and passion restless, accident and community inevitable. Everybody with whom one had relations had other relations too, and even indifference was a mixture and detachment a compromise. The only wisdom was to consent to the loss, if necessary, of everything but one's temper and to the ruin, if necessary, of everything but one's work. It must be added that Peter's relative took precautions against irritation perhaps in excess of the danger, as departing travellers about to whiz through foreign countries mouth in phrase-books combinations of words they

will never use. He was at home in clear air and disliked to struggle either for breath or for light. He had a dim sense that Peter felt some discomfort from him and might have come now to tell him so; in which case he should be sorry for the sufferer in various ways. But as soon as that aspirant began to speak suspicion reverted to mere ancient kindness, and this in spite of the fact that his speech had a slightly exaggerated promptitude, like the promptitude of business, which might have denoted self-consciousness. To Nick it quickly appeared better to be glad than to be sorry: this simple argument was more than sufficient to make him glad Peter was there.

"My dear fellow, it's an unpardonable hour, is n't it? I was n't even sure you'd be up, yet had to risk it, because my hours are numbered. I'm going away to-morrow," Peter went on; "I've a thousand things to do. I've had no talk with you this time such as we used to have of old (it's an irreparable loss, but it's your fault, you know) and as I've got to rush about all day I thought I'd just catch you before any one else does."

"Some one has already caught me, but there's plenty of time," Nick returned.

Peter all but asked a question — it fell short. "I see, I see. I'm sorry to say I've only a few minutes at best."

"Man of crushing responsibilities, you've come to humiliate me!" his companion cried. "I know all about it."

"It's more than I do then. That's not what I've

come for, but I shall be delighted if I humiliate you a little by the way. I've two things in mind, and I'll mention the most difficult first. I came here the other day — the day after my arrival in town."

"Ah yes, so you did; it was very good of you" — Nick remembered. "I ought to have returned your visit or left a card or written my name — to have done something in Great Stanhope Street, ought n't I? You had n't got this new thing then, or I'd have 'called.'"

Peter eyed him a moment. "I say, what's the matter with you? Am I really unforgiveable for having taken that liberty?"

"What liberty?" Nick looked now quite innocent of care, and indeed his visitor's allusion was not promptly clear. He was thinking for the instant all of Biddy, of whom and whose secret inclinations Grace had insisted on talking to him. They were none of his business, and if he would n't for the world have let the girl herself suspect he had violent lights on what was most screened and curtained in her, much less would he have made Peter a clumsy present of this knowledge. Grace had a queer theory that Peter treated Biddy badly — treated them all somehow badly; but Grace's zeal (she had plenty of it, though she affected all sorts of fine indifference) almost always took the form of her being unusually wrong. Nick wanted to do only what Biddy would thank him for, and he knew very well what she would n't. She wished him and Peter to be great friends, and the only obstacle to this was that Peter was too much of a diplomatist. Peter made him for

an instant think of her and of the hour they had lately spent together in the studio in his absence — an hour of which Biddy had given him a history full of items and omissions; and this in turn brought Nick's imagination back to his visitor's own side of the matter. That general human complexity of which the sense had lately increased with him, and to which it was owing that any thread one might take hold of would probably be the extremely wrong end of something, was illustrated by the fact that while poor Biddy was thinking of Peter it was ten to one poor Peter was thinking of Miriam Rooth. All of which danced before Nick's intellectual vision for a space briefer than my too numerous words.

"I pitched into your treasures — I rummaged among your canvases," Peter said. "Biddy had nothing whatever to do with it — she maintained an attitude of irreproachable reserve. It has been on my conscience all these days and I ought to have done penance before. I've been putting it off partly because I'm so ashamed of my indiscretion. *Que voulez-vous*, my dear chap? My provocation was great. I heard you had been painting Miss Rooth, so that I could n't restrain my curiosity. I simply went into that corner and struck out there — a trifle wildly no doubt. I dragged the young lady to the light — your sister turned pale as she saw me. It was a good deal like breaking open one of your letters, was n't it? However, I assure you it's all right, for I congratulate you both on your style and on your correspondent."

"You're as clever, as witty, as humorous as ever,

old boy," Nick pronounced, going himself into the corner designated by his companion and laying his hands on the same canvas. "Your curiosity's the highest possible tribute to my little attempt and your sympathy sets me right with myself. There she is again," Nick went on, thrusting the picture into an empty frame; "you shall see her whether you wish to or not."

"Right with yourself? You don't mean to say you've been wrong!" Peter returned, standing opposite the portrait.

"Oh I don't know. I've been kicking up such a row. Anything's better than a row."

"She's awfully good — she's awfully true," said Peter. "You've done more to her since the other day. You've put in several things."

"Yes, but I've worked distractedly. I've not altogether conformed to the good rule about being off with the old love."

"With the old love?" — and the visitor looked hard at the picture.

"Before you're on with the new!" Nick had no sooner uttered these words than he coloured: it occurred to him his friend would probably infer an allusion to Julia. He therefore added quickly: "It is n't so easy to cease to represent an affectionate constituency. Really most of my time for a fortnight has been given to letter-writing. They've all been unexpectedly charming. I should have thought they'd have loathed and despised me. But not a bit of it; they cling to me fondly — they struggle with me tenderly. I've been down to talk with them about

it, and we've passed the most sociable delightful hours. I've designated my successor; I've felt a good deal like the Emperor Charles the Fifth when about to retire to the monastery of Yuste. The more I've seen of them in this way the more I've liked them, and they declare it has been the same with themselves about me. We spend our time assuring each other we had n't begun to know each other till now. In short it's all wonderfully jolly, but it is n't business. C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

"They're not so charming as they might be if they don't offer to keep you and let you paint."

"They do, almost — it's fantastic," said Nick. "Remember they have n't yet seen a daub of my brush."

"Well, I'm sorry for you; we live in too enlightened an age," Peter returned. "You can't suffer for art — that grand romance is over. Your experience is interesting; it seems to show that at the tremendous pitch of civilisation we've reached you can't suffer from anything but hunger."

"I shall doubtless," Nick allowed, "do that enough to make up for the rest."

"Never, never, when you paint so well as this."

"Oh come, you're too good to be true," Nick said. "But where did you learn that one's larder's full in proportion as one's work's fine?"

Peter waived this curious point — he only continued to look at the picture; after which he roundly brought out: "I'll give you your price for it on the spot."

"Ah you're so magnanimous that you shall have it for nothing!" And Nick, touched to gratitude, passed his arm into his visitor's.

Peter had a pause. "Why do you call me magnanimous?"

"Oh bless my soul, it's hers — I forgot!" laughed Nick, failing in his turn to answer the other's enquiry. "But you shall have another."

"Another? Are you going to do another?"

"This very morning. That is I shall begin it. I've heard from her; she's coming to sit — a short time hence."

Peter turned away a little at this, releasing himself, and, as if the movement had been an effect of his host's words, looked at his watch earnestly to dissipate that appearance. He fell back to consider the work from further off. "The more you do her the better — she has all the qualities of a great model. From that point of view it's a pity she has another trade: she might make so good a thing of this one. But how shall you do her again?" he asked ingenuously.

"Oh I can scarcely say; we'll arrange something; we'll talk it over. It's extraordinary how well she enters into what one wants: she knows more than one does one's self. She is n't, as you Frenchmen say, the first comer. However, you know all about that, since you invented her, did n't you? That's what she says; she's awfully sweet on you," Nick kindly pursued. "What I ought to do is to try something as different as possible from that thing; not the sibyl, the muse, the tremendous creature, but the

charming woman, the person one knows, differently arranged as she appears *en ville*, she calls it. I'll do something really serious and send it to you out there with my respects. It will remind you of home and perhaps a little even of me. If she knows it's for you she'll throw herself into it in the right spirit. Leave it to us, my dear fellow; we'll turn out something splendid."

"It's jolly to hear you, but I shall send you a cheque," said Peter very stoutly.

"I suppose it's all right in your position, but you're too proud," his kinsman answered.

"What do you mean by my position?"

"Your exaltation, your high connexion with the country, your treating with sovereign powers as the representative of a sovereign power. Is n't that what they call 'em?"

Peter, who had turned round again, listened to this with his eyes fixed on Nick's face while he once more drew forth his watch. "Brute!" he exclaimed familiarly, at the same time dropping his eyes on the watch. "When did you say you expect your sitter?"

"Oh we've plenty of time; don't be afraid of letting me see you agitated by her presence."

"Brute!" Peter again ejaculated.

This friendly personal note cleared the air, made their communication closer. "Stay with me and talk to me," said Nick; "I dare say it's good for me. It may be the last time I shall see you without having before anything else to koo-too."

"Beast!" his kinsman once more, and a little helplessly, threw off; though next going on: "have n't

you something more to show me then — some other fruit of your genius?"

"Must I bribe you by setting my sign-boards in a row? You know what I've done; by which I mean of course you know what I have n't. My genius, as you're so good as to call it, has hitherto been dreadfully sterile. I've had no time, no opportunity, no continuity. I must go and sit down in a corner and learn my alphabet. That thing is n't good; what I shall do for you won't be good. Don't protest, my dear fellow; nothing will be fit to look at for a long time." After which poor Nick wound up: "And think of my ridiculous age! As the good people say (or don't they say it?) it's a rum go. It won't be amusing."

"Ah you're so clever you'll get on fast," Peter returned, trying to think how he could most richly defy the injunction not to protest.

"I mean it won't be amusing for others," said Nick, unperturbed by this levity. "They want results, and small blame to them."

"Well, whatever you do, don't talk like Mr. Gabriel Nash," Peter went on. "Sometimes I think you're just going to."

Nick stared a moment. "Ah he never would have said *that*. 'They want results, the damned asses' — that would have been more in his key."

"It's the difference of a *nuance!* And are you extraordinarily happy?" Peter added as his host now obliged him by arranging half a dozen canvases so that he could look at them.

"Not so much so, doubtless, as the artistic life

ought to make one: because all one's people are not so infatuated as one's electors. But little by little I'm learning the charm of pig-headedness."

"Your mother's very bad," Peter allowed—"I lunched with her day before yesterday."

"Yes, I know, I know"—Nick had such reason to know; "but it's too late, too late. I must just peg away here and not mind. I've after all a great advantage in my life."

His companion waited impartially to hear. "And that would be—?"

"Well, knowing what I want to do. That's everything, you know."

"It's an advantage, however, that you've only just come in for, is n't it?"

"Yes, but the delay and the probation only make me prize it the more. I've got it now; and it makes up for the absence of some other things."

Again Peter had a pause. "That sounds a little flat," he remarked at last.

"It depends on what you compare it with. It has more point than I sometimes found in the House of Commons."

"Oh I never thought I should like that!"

There was another drop during which Nick moved about the room turning up old sketches to see if he had anything more to show, while his visitor continued to look at the unfinished and in some cases, as seemed, unpromising productions already exposed. They were far less interesting than the portrait of Miriam Rooth and, it would have appeared, less significant of ability. For that particular

effort Nick's talent had taken an inspired flight. So much Peter thought, as he had thought it intensely before; but the words he presently uttered had no visible connexion with it. They only consisted of the abrupt enquiry: "Have you heard anything from Julia?"

"Not a syllable. Have you?"

"Dear no; she never writes to me."

"But won't she on the occasion of your promotion?"

"I dare say not," said Peter; and this was the only reference to Mrs. Dallow that passed between her brother and her late intended. It left a slight stir of the air which Peter proceeded to allay by an allusion comparatively speaking more relevant. He expressed disappointment that Biddy should n't have come in, having had an idea she was always in Rosedale Road of a morning. That was the other branch of his present errand — the wish to see her and give her a message for Lady Agnes, upon whom, at so early an hour, he had not presumed to intrude in Calcutta Gardens. Nick replied that Biddy did in point of fact almost always turn up, and for the most part early: she came to wish him good-morning and start him for the day. She was a devoted Electra, laying a cool healing hand on a distracted perspiring Orestes. He reminded Peter, however, that he would have a chance of seeing her that evening, and of seeing Lady Agnes; for was n't he to do them the honour of dining in Calcutta Gardens? Biddy, the day before, had arrived full of that excitement. Peter explained that this was exactly the sad sub-

ject of his actual *démarche:* the project of the dinner in Calcutta Gardens had, to his exceeding regret, fallen to pieces. The fact was (did n't Nick know it?) the night had been suddenly and perversely fixed for Miriam's *première*, and he was under a definite engagement with her not to stay away from it. To add to the bore of the thing he was obliged to return to Paris the very next morning. He was quite awfully sorry, for he had promised Lady Agnes: he did n't understand then about Miriam's affair, in regard to which he had given a previous pledge. He was more grieved than he could say, but he could never fail Miss Rooth: he had professed from the first an interest in her which he must live up to a little more. This was his last chance — he had n't been near her at the trying time of her first braving of the public. And the second night of the play would n't do — it must be the first or nothing. Besides, he could n't wait over till Monday.

While Peter recited all his hindrance Nick was occupied in rubbing with a cloth a palette he had just scraped. "I see what you mean — I 'm very sorry too. I 'm sorry you can't give my mother this joy — I give her so little."

"My dear fellow, you might give her a little more!" it came to Peter to say. "It's rather too much to expect *me* to make up for your omissions!"

Nick looked at him with a moment's fixedness while he polished the palette; and for that moment he felt the temptation to reply: "There's a way you could do that, to a considerable extent — I think you guess it — which would n't be intrinsically dis-

agreeable." But the impulse passed without expressing itself in speech, and he simply brought out: "You can make this all clear to Biddy when she comes, and she'll make it clear to my mother."

"Poor little Biddy!" Peter mentally sighed, thinking of the girl with that job before her; but what he articulated was that this was exactly why he had come to the studio. He had inflicted his company on Lady Agnes the previous Thursday and had partaken of a meal with her, but had not seen Biddy though he had waited for her, had hoped immensely she'd come in. Now he'd wait again — dear Bid was thoroughly worth it.

"Patience, patience then — you've always me!" said Nick; to which he subjoined: "If it's a question of going to the play I scarcely see why you should n't dine at my mother's all the same. People go to the play after dinner."

"Yes, but it would n't be fair, it would n't be decent: it's a case when I must be in my seat from the rise of the curtain." Peter, about this, was thoroughly lucid. "I should force your mother to dine an hour earlier than usual and then in return for her courtesy should go off to my entertainment at eight o'clock, leaving her and Grace and Biddy languishing there. I wish I had proposed in time that they should go with me," he continued not very ingenuously.

"You might do that still," Nick suggested.

"Oh at this time of day it would be impossible to get a box."

"I'll speak to Miss Rooth about it if you like when she comes," smiled Nick.

"No, it would n't do," said Peter, turning away and looking once more at his watch. He made tacitly the addition that still less than asking Lady Agnes for his convenience to dine early would *this* be decent, would it be thinkable. His taking Biddy the night he dined with her and with Miss Tressilian had been something very like a violation of those proprieties. He could n't say that, however, to the girl's brother, who remarked in a moment that it was all right, since Peter's action left him his own freedom.

"Your own freedom?" — and Peter's question made him turn.

"Why you see now I can go to the theatre myself."

"Certainly; I had n't thought of that. You'd naturally have been going."

"I gave it up for the prospect of your company at home."

"Upon my word you're too good — I don't deserve such sacrifices," said Peter, who read in his kinsman's face that this was not a figure of speech but the absolute truth. "Did n't it, however, occur to you that, as it would turn out, I might — I even naturally *would* — myself be going?" he put forth.

Nick broke into a laugh. "It would have occurred to me if I understood a little better —!" But he paused, as still too amused.

"If you understood a little better what?"

"Your situation, simply."

Peter looked at him a moment. "Dine with me

to-night by ourselves and at a club. We'll go to the theatre together and then you'll understand it."

"With pleasure, with pleasure: we'll have a jolly evening," said Nick.

"Call it jolly if you like. When did you say she was coming?" Peter asked.

"Biddy? Oh probably, as I tell you, at any moment."

"I mean the great Miriam," Peter amended.

"The great Miriam, if she's punctual, will be here in about forty minutes."

"And will she be likely to find your sister?"

"That will depend, my dear fellow, on whether my sister remains to see her."

"Exactly; but the point's whether you'll allow her to remain, is n't it?"

Nick looked slightly mystified. "Why should n't she do as she likes?"

"In that case she'll probably go."

"Yes, unless she stays."

"Don't let her," Peter dropped; "send her away." And to explain this he added: "It does n't seem exactly the right sort of thing, fresh young creatures like Bid meeting *des femmes de théâtre*." His explanation, in turn, struck him as requiring another clause; so he went on: "At least it is n't thought the right sort of thing abroad, and even in England my foreign ideas stick to me."

Even with this amplification, however, his plea evidently still had for his companion a flaw; which, after he had considered it a moment, Nick exposed in the simple words: "Why, you originally intro-

duced them in Paris, Biddy and Miss Rooth. Did n't they meet at your rooms and fraternise, and was n't that much more 'abroad' than this?"

"So they did, but my hand had been forced and she did n't like it," Peter answered, suspecting that for a diplomatist he looked foolish.

"Miss Rooth did n't like it?" Nick persisted.

"That I confess I've forgotten. Besides, she was n't an actress then. What I mean is that Biddy was n't particularly pleased with her."

"Why she thought her wonderful — praised her to the skies. I remember that."

"She did n't like her as a woman; she praised her as an actress."

"I thought you said she was n't an actress then," Nick returned.

Peter had a pause. "Oh Biddy thought so. She has seen her since moreover. I took her the other night, and her curiosity's satisfied."

"It's not of any consequence, and if there's a reason for it I'll bundle her off directly," Nick made haste to say. "But the great Miriam seems such a kind good person."

"So she is, charming, charming," — and his visitor looked hard at him.

"Here comes Biddy now," Nick went on. "I hear her at the door: you can warn her yourself."

"It is n't a question of 'warning' — that's not in the least my idea. But I'll take Biddy away," said Peter.

"That will be still more energetic."

"No, it will be simply more selfish — I like her

company." Peter had turned as if to go to the door and meet the girl; but he quickly checked himself, lingering in the middle of the room, and the next instant Biddy had come in. When she saw him there she also stopped.

XLIII

"Come on boldly, my dear," said Nick. "Peter's bored to death waiting for you."

"Ah he's come to say he won't dine with us to-night!" Biddy stood with her hand on the latch.

"I leave town to-morrow: I've everything to do; I'm broken-hearted; it's impossible" — Peter made of it again such a case as he could. "Please make my peace with your mother — I'm ashamed of not having written to her last night."

She closed the door and came in while her brother said to her "How in the world did you guess it?"

"I saw it in the *Morning Post*." And she kept her eyes on their kinsman.

"In the *Morning Post?*" he vaguely echoed.

"I saw there's to be a first night at that theatre, the one you took us to. So I said 'Oh he'll go there.'"

"Yes, I've got to do that too," Peter admitted.

"She's going to sit to me again this morning, his wonderful actress — she has made an appointment: so you see I'm getting on," Nick pursued to his sister.

"Oh I'm so glad — she's so splendid!" The girl looked away from her cousin now, but not, though it seemed to fill the place, at the triumphant portrait of Miriam Rooth.

"I'm delighted you've come in. I *have* waited for

you," Peter hastened to declare to her, though conscious that this was in the conditions meagre.

"Are n't you coming to see us again?"

"I'm in despair, but I shall really not have time. Therefore it's a blessing not to have missed you here."

"I'm very glad," said Biddy. Then she added: "And you're going to America — to stay a long time?"

"Till I'm sent to some better place."

"And will that better place be as far away?"

"Oh Biddy, it would n't be better then," said Peter.

"Do you mean they'll give you something to do at home?"

"Hardly that. But I've a tremendous lot to do at home to-day." For the twentieth time Peter referred to his watch.

She turned to her brother, who had admonished her that she might bid him good-morning. She kissed him and he asked what the news would be in Calcutta Gardens; to which she made answer: "The only news is of course the great preparations they're making, poor dears, for Peter. Mamma thinks you must have had such a nasty dinner the other day," the girl continued to the guest of that romantic occasion.

"Faithless Peter!" said Nick, beginning to whistle and to arrange a canvas in anticipation of Miriam's arrival.

"Dear Biddy, thank your stars you're not in my horrid profession," protested the personage so designated. "One's bowled about like a cricket-ball,

unable to answer for one's freedom or one's comfort from one moment to another."

"Oh ours is the true profession — Biddy's and mine," Nick broke out, setting up his canvas: "the career of liberty and peace, of charming long mornings spent in a still north light and in the contemplation, I may even say in the company, of the amiable and the beautiful."

"That certainly's the case when Biddy comes to see you," Peter returned.

Biddy smiled at him. "I come every day. *Anch' io son pittore!* I encourage Nick awfully."

"It's a pity I'm not a martyr — she'd bravely perish with me," Nick said.

"You are — you're a martyr — when people say such odious things!" the girl cried. "They do say them. I've heard many more than I've repeated to you."

"It's you yourself then, indignant and loyal, who are the martyr," observed Peter, who wanted greatly to be kind to her.

"Oh I don't care!" — but she threw herself, flushed and charming, into a straight appeal to him. "Don't you think one can do as much good by painting great works of art as by — as by what papa used to do? Don't you think art's necessary to the happiness, to the greatness of a people? Don't you think it's manly and honourable? Do you think a passion for it's a thing to be ashamed of? Don't you think the artist — the conscientious, the serious one — is as distinguished a member of society as any one else?"

Peter and Nick looked at each other and laughed at the way she had got up her subject, and Nick asked their kinsman if she did n't express it all in perfection. "I delight in general in artists, but I delight still more in their defenders," Peter made reply, perhaps a little meagrely, to Biddy.

"Ah don't attack me if you're wise!" Nick said.

"One's tempted to when it makes Biddy so fine."

"Well, that's the way she encourages me: it's meat and drink to me," Nick went on. "At the same time I'm bound to say there's a little whistling in the dark in it."

"In the dark?" his sister demanded.

"The obscurity, my dear child, of your own aspirations, your mysterious ambitions and æsthetic views. Are n't there some heavyish shadows there?"

"Why I never cared for politics."

"No, but you cared for life, you cared for society, and you've chosen the path of solitude and concentration."

"You horrid boy!" said Biddy.

"Give it up, that arduous steep — give it up and come out with me," Peter interposed.

"Come out with you?"

"Let us walk a little or even drive a little. Let us at any rate talk a little."

"I thought you had so much to do," Biddy candidly objected.

"So I have, but why should n't you do a part of it with me? Would there be any harm? I'm going to some tiresome shops — you'll cheer the frugal hour."

The girl hesitated, then turned to Nick. "Would there be any harm?"

"Oh it's none of *his* business!" Peter protested.

"He had better take you home to your mother."

"I'm going home — I shan't stay here to-day," Biddy went on. Then to Peter: "I came in a hansom, but I shall walk back. Come that way with me."

"With pleasure. But I shall not be able to go in," Peter added.

"Oh that's no matter," said the girl. "Good-bye, Nick."

"You understand then that we dine together — at seven sharp. Would n't a club, as I say, be best?" Peter, before going, enquired of Nick. He suggested further which club it should be; and his words led Biddy, who had directed her steps toward the door, to turn a moment as with a reproachful question — whether it was for this Peter had given up Calcutta Gardens. But her impulse, if impulse it was, had no sequel save so far as it was a sequel that Peter freely explained to her, after Nick had assented to his conditions, that her brother too had a desire to go to Miss Rooth's first night and had already promised to accompany him.

"Oh that's perfect; it will be so good for him — won't it? — if he's going to paint her again," Biddy responded.

"I think there's nothing so good for him as that he happens to have such a sister as you," Peter declared as they went out. He heard at the same time the sound of a carriage stopping, and before Biddy, who was in front of him, opened the door of the house

had been able to say to himself "What a bore — there's Miriam!" The opened door showed him that truth — this young lady in the act of alighting from the brougham provided by Basil Dashwood's thrifty zeal. Her mother followed her, and both the new visitors exclaimed and rejoiced, in their demonstrative way, as their eyes fell on their valued friend. The door had closed behind Peter, but he instantly and violently rang, so that they should be admitted with as little delay as possible, while he stood disconcerted, and fearing he showed it, by the prompt occurrence of an encounter he had particularly sought to avert. It ministered moreover a little to this sensibility that Miriam appeared to have come somewhat before her time. The incident promised, however, to pass off in a fine florid way. Before he knew it both the ladies had taken possession of Biddy, who looked at them with comparative coldness, tempered indeed by a faint glow of apprehension, and Miriam had broken out:

"We know you, we know you; we saw you in Paris, and you came to my theatre a short time ago with Mr. Sherringham!"

"We know your mother, Lady Agnes Dormer. I hope her ladyship's very well," said Mrs. Rooth, who had never struck Peter as a more objectionable old woman.

"You offered to do a head of me or something or other: did n't you tell me you work in clay? I dare say you've forgotten all about it, but I should be delighted," Miriam pursued with the richest urbanity. Peter was not concerned with her mother's

pervasiveness, though he did n't like Biddy to see even that; but he hoped his companion would take the overcharged benevolence of the young actress in the spirit in which, rather to his surprise, it evidently was offered. "I've sat to your clever brother many times," said Miriam; "I'm going to sit again. I dare say you've seen what we've done — he's too delightful. Si vous saviez comme cela me repose!" she added, turning for a moment to Peter. Then she continued, smiling at Biddy: "Only he ought n't to have thrown up such prospects, you know. I've an idea I was n't nice to you that day in Paris — I was nervous and scared and perverse. I remember perfectly; I *was* odious. But I'm better now — you'd see if you were to know me. I'm not a bad sort — really I'm not. But you must have your own friends. Happy they — you look so charming! Immensely like Mr. Dormer, especially about the eyes; is n't she, mamma?"

"She comes of a beautiful Norman race — the finest purest strain," the old woman simpered. "Mr. Dormer's sometimes so good as to come and see us — we're always at home on Sunday; and if some day you found courage to come with him you might perhaps find it pleasant, though very different of course from the circle in which you habitually move."

Biddy murmured a vague recognition of these wonderful civilities, and Miriam commented: "Different, yes; but we're all right, you know. Do come," she added. Then turning to Sherringham: "Remember what I told you — I don't expect you to-night."

"Oh I understand; I shall come," — and Peter knew he grew red.

"It will be idiotic. Keep him, keep him away — don't let him," Miriam insisted to Biddy; with which, as Nick's portals now were gaping, she drew her mother away.

Peter, at this, walked off briskly with Biddy, dropping as he did so: "She's too fantastic!"

"Yes, but so tremendously good-looking. I shall ask Nick to take me there," the girl said after a moment.

"Well, she'll do you no harm. They're all right, as she says. It's the world of art — you were standing up so for art just now."

"Oh I was n't thinking so much of that kind," she demurred.

"There's only one kind — it's all the same thing. If one sort's good the other is."

Biddy walked along a moment. "Is she serious? Is she conscientious?"

"She has the makings of a great artist," Peter opined.

"I'm glad to hear you think a woman can be one."

"In that line there has never been any doubt about it."

"And only in that line?"

"I mean on the stage in general, dramatic or lyric. It's as the actress that the woman produces the most complete and satisfactory artistic results."

"And only as the actress?"

He weighed it. "Yes, there's another art in which she's not bad."

"Which one do you mean?" asked Biddy.

"That of being charming and good, that of being indispensable to man."

"Oh that is n't an art."

"Then you leave her only the stage. Take it if you like in the widest sense."

Biddy appeared to reflect a moment, as to judge what sense this might be. But she found none that was wide enough, for she cried the next minute: "Do you mean to say there's nothing for a woman but to be an actress?"

"Never in my life. I only say that that's the best thing for a woman to be who finds herself irresistibly carried into the practice of the arts; for there her capacity for them has most application and her incapacity for them least. But at the same time I strongly recommend her not to be an artist if she can possibly help it. It's a devil of a life."

"Oh I know; men want women not to be anything."

"It's a poor little refuge they try to take from the overwhelming consciousness that you're in very fact everything."

"Everything?" And the girl gave a toss. "That's the kind of thing you say to keep us quiet."

"Dear Biddy, you see how well we succeed!" laughed Peter.

To which she replied by asking irrelevantly: "Why is it so necessary for you to go to the theatre to-night if Miss Rooth does n't want you to?"

"My dear child, she does want me to. But that has nothing to do with it."

"Why then did she say that she does n't?"

"Oh because she meant just the contrary."

"Is she so false then — is she so vulgar?"

"She speaks a special language; practically it is n't false, because it renders her thought and those who know her understand it."

"But she does n't use it only to those who know her," Biddy returned, "since she asked me, who have so little the honour of her acquaintance, to keep you away to-night. How am I to know that she meant by that that I 'm to urge you on to go?"

He was on the point of replying "Because you 've my word for it"; but he shrank in fact from giving his word — he had some fine scruples — and sought to relieve his embarrassment by a general tribute. "Dear Biddy, you're delightfully acute: you're quite as clever as Miss Rooth." He felt, however, that this was scarcely adequate and he continued: "The truth is that its being important for me to go is a matter quite independent of that young lady's wishing it or not wishing it. There happens to be a definite intrinsic propriety in it which determines the thing and which it would take me long to explain."

"I see. But fancy your 'explaining' to me: you make me feel so indiscreet!" the girl cried quickly — an exclamation which touched him because he was not aware that, quick as it had been, she had still had time to be struck first — though she would n't for the world have expressed it — with the oddity of such a duty at such a season. In fact that oddity, during a silence of some minutes, came back to

Peter himself: the note had been forced — it sounded almost ignobly frivolous from a man on the eve of proceeding to a high diplomatic post. The effect of this, none the less, was not to make him break out with "Hang it, I *will* keep my engagement to your mother!" but to fill him with the wish to shorten his present strain by taking Biddy the rest of the way in a cab. He was uncomfortable, and there were hansoms about that he looked at wistfully. While he was so occupied his companion took up the talk by an abrupt appeal.

"Why did she say that Nick ought n't to have resigned his seat?"

"Oh I don't know. It struck her so. It does n't matter much."

But Biddy kept it up. "If she's an artist herself why does n't she like people to go in for art, especially when Nick has given his time to painting her so beautifully? Why does she come there so often if she disapproves of what he has done?"

"Oh Miriam's disapproval — it does n't count; it's a manner of speaking."

"Of speaking untruths, do you mean? Does she think just the reverse — is that the way she talks about everything?"

"We always admire most what we can do least," Peter brought forth; "and Miriam of course is n't political. She ranks painters more or less with her own profession, about which already, new as she is to it, she has no illusions. They're all artists; it's the same general sort of thing. She prefers men of the world — men of action."

"Is that the reason she likes you?" Biddy mildly mocked.

"Ah she does n't like me — could n't you see it?"

The girl at first said nothing; then she asked: "Is that why she lets you call her 'Miriam'?"

"Oh I don't, to her face."

"Ah only to mine!" laughed Biddy.

"One says that as one says 'Rachel' of her great predecessor."

"Except that she is n't so great, quite yet, is she?"

"Far from it; she's the freshest of novices — she has scarcely been four months on the stage. But no novice has ever been such an adept. She'll go very fast," Peter pursued, "and I dare say that before long she'll be magnificent."

"What a pity you'll not see that!" Biddy sighed after a pause.

"Not see it?"

"If you're thousands of miles away."

"It *is* a pity," Peter said; "and since you mention it I don't mind frankly telling you — throwing myself on your mercy, as it were — that that's why I make such a point of a rare occasion like to-night. I've a weakness for the drama that, as you perhaps know, I've never concealed, and this impression will probably have to last me in some barren spot for many, many years."

"I understand — I understand. I hope therefore it will be charming." And the girl walked faster.

"Just as some other charming impressions will have to last," Peter added, conscious of keeping up

with her by some effort. She seemed almost to be running away from him, an impression that led him to suggest, after they had proceeded a little further without more words, that if she were in a hurry they had perhaps better take a cab. Her face was strange and touching to him as she turned it to make answer:

"Oh I'm not in the least in a hurry and I really think I had better walk."

"We'll walk then by all means!" Peter said with slightly exaggerated gaiety; in pursuance of which they went on a hundred yards. Biddy kept the same pace; yet it was scarcely a surprise to him that she should suddenly stop with the exclamation:

"After all, though I'm not in a hurry I'm tired! I had better have a cab; please call that one," she added, looking about her.

They were in a straight blank ugly street, where the small cheap grey-faced houses had no expression save that of a rueful unconsoled acknowledgement of the universal want of identity. They would have constituted a "terrace" if they could, but they had dolefully given it up. Even a hansom that loitered across the end of the vista turned a sceptical back upon it, so that Sherringham had to lift his voice in a loud appeal. He stood with Biddy watching the cab approach them. "This is one of the charming things you'll remember," she said, turning her eyes to the general dreariness from the particular figure of the vehicle, which was antiquated and clumsy. Before he could reply she had lightly stepped into the cab; but as he answered "Most assuredly it is"

and prepared to follow her she quickly closed the apron.

"I must go alone; you've lots of things to do — it's all right;" and through the aperture in the roof she gave the driver her address. She had spoken with decision, and Peter fully felt now that she wished to get away from him. Her eyes betrayed it, as well as her voice, in a look, a strange wandering ray that as he stood there with his hand on the cab he had time to take from her. "Good-bye, Peter," she smiled; and as the thing began to rumble away he uttered the same tepid ridiculous farewell.

XLIV

At the entrance of Miriam and her mother Nick, in the studio, had stopped whistling, but he was still gay enough to receive them with every appearance of warmth. He thought it a poor place, ungarnished, untapestried, a bare, almost grim workshop, with all its revelations and honours still to come. But his visitors smiled on it a good deal in the same way in which they had smiled on Bridget Dormer when they met her at the door: Mrs. Rooth because vague prudent approbation was the habit of her foolish face — it was ever the least danger; and Miriam because, as seemed, she was genuinely glad to find herself within the walls of which she spoke now as her asylum. She broke out in this strain to her host almost as soon as she had crossed the threshold, commending his circumstances, his conditions of work, as infinitely happier than her own. He was quiet, independent, absolute, free to do what he liked as he liked it, shut up in his little temple with his altar and his divinity; not hustled about in a mob of people, having to posture and grin to pit and gallery, to square himself at every step with insufferable conventions and with the ignorance and vanity of others. He was blissfully alone.

"Mercy, how you do abuse your fine profession! I'm sure I never urged you to adopt it!" Mrs. Rooth cried, in real bewilderment, to her daughter.

"She was abusing mine still more the other day," joked Nick — "telling me I ought to be ashamed of it and of myself."

"Oh I never know from one moment to the other — I live with my heart in my mouth," sighed the old woman.

"Are n't you quiet about the great thing — about my personal behaviour?" Miriam smiled. "My improprieties are all of the mind."

"I don't know what you *call* your personal behaviour," her mother objected.

"You would very soon if it were not what it is."

"And I don't know why you should wish to have it thought you've a wicked mind," Mrs. Rooth agreeably grumbled.

"Yes, but I don't see very well how I can make you understand that. At any rate," Miriam pursued with her grand eyes on Nick, "I retract what I said the other day about Mr. Dormer. I've no wish to quarrel with him on the way he has determined to dispose of his life, because after all it does suit me very well. It rests me, this little devoted corner; oh it rests me! It's out of the row and the dust, it's deliciously still and they can't get at me. Ah when art's like this, *à la bonne heure!*" And she looked round on such a presentment of "art" in a splendid way that produced amusement on the young man's part at its contrast with the humble fact. Miriam shone upon him as if she liked to be the cause of his mirth and went on appealing to him: "You'll always let me come here for an hour, won't you, to take breath — to let the whirlwind pass? You

need n't trouble yourself about me; I don't mean to impose on you in the least the necessity of painting me, though if that's a manner of helping you to get on you may be sure it will always be open to you. Do what you like with me in that respect; only let me sit here on a high stool, keeping well out of your way, and see what you happen to be doing. I'll tell you my own adventures when you want to hear them."

"The fewer adventures you have to tell the better, my dear," said Mrs. Rooth; "and if Mr. Dormer keeps you quiet he'll add ten years to my life."

"It all makes an interesting comment on Mr. Dormer's own quietness, on his independence and sweet solitude," Nick observed. "Miss Rooth has to work with others, which is after all only what Mr. Dormer has to do when he works with Miss Rooth. What do you make of the inevitable sitter?"

"Oh," answered Miriam, "you can say to the inevitable sitter 'Hold your tongue, you brute!'"

"Is n't it a good deal in that manner that I've heard you address your comrades at the theatre?" Mrs. Rooth enquired. "That's why my heart's in my mouth."

"Yes, but they hit me back; they reply to me — *comme de raison* — as I should never think of replying to Mr. Dormer. It's a great advantage to him that when he's peremptory with his model it only makes her better, adds to her expression of gloomy grandeur."

"We did the gloomy grandeur in the other picture: suppose therefore we try something different in this," Nick threw off.

"It *is* serious, it *is* grand," murmured Mrs. Rooth, who had taken up a rapt attitude before the portrait of her daughter. "It makes one wonder what she's thinking of. Beautiful commendable things — that's what it seems to say."

"What can I be thinking of but the tremendous wisdom of my mother?" Miriam returned. "I brought her this morning to see that thing — she had only seen it in its earliest stage — and not to presume to advise you about anything else you may be so good as to embark on. She wanted, or professed she wanted, terribly to know what you had finally arrived at. She was too impatient to wait till you should send it home."

"Ah send it home — send it home; let us have it always with us!" Mrs. Rooth engagingly said. "It will keep us up, up and up on the heights, near the stars — be always for us a symbol and a reminder!"

"You see I was right," Miriam went on; "for she appreciates thoroughly, in her own way, and almost understands. But if she worries or distracts you I'll send her directly home — I've kept the carriage there on purpose. I must add that I don't feel quite safe to-day in letting her out of my sight. She's liable to make dashes at the theatre and play unconscionable tricks there. I shall never again accuse mamma of a want of interest in my profession. Her interest to-day exceeds even my own. She's all over the place and she has ideas — ah but ideas! She's capable of turning up at the theatre at five o'clock this afternoon to demand the repainting of the set in the third act. For myself I've not a word

more to say on the subject — I've accepted every danger, I've swallowed my fate. Everything's no doubt wrong, but nothing can possibly be right. Let us eat and drink, for to-night we die. If you say so mamma shall go and sit in the carriage, and as there's no means of fastening the doors (is there?) your servant shall keep guard over her."

"Just as you are now — be so good as to remain so; sitting just that way — leaning back with a smile in your eyes and one hand on the sofa beside you and supporting you a little. I shall stick a flower into the other hand — let it lie in your lap just as it is. Keep that thing on your head — it's admirably uncovered: do you call such an unconsidered trifle a bonnet? — and let your head fall back a little. There it is — it's found. This time I shall really do something, and it will be as different as you like from that other crazy job. Here we go!" It was in these irrelevant but earnest words that Nick responded to his sitter's uttered vagaries, of which her charming tone and countenance diminished the superficial acerbity. He held up his hands a moment, to fix her in her limits, and in a few minutes had a happy sense of having begun to work.

"The smile in her eyes — don't forget the smile in her eyes!" Mrs. Rooth softly chanted, turning away and creeping about the room. "That will make it so different from the other picture and show the two sides of her genius, the wonderful range between them. They'll be splendid mates, and though I dare say I shall strike you as greedy you must let me hope you'll send this one home too."

She explored the place discreetly and on tiptoe, talking twaddle as she went and bending her head and her eyeglass over various objects with an air of imperfect comprehension that did n't prevent Nick's private recall of the story of her underhand commercial habits told by Gabriel Nash at the exhibition in Paris the first time her name had fallen on his ear. A queer old woman from whom, if you approached her in the right way, you could buy old pots — it was in this character that she had originally been introduced to him. He had lost sight of it afterwards, but it revived again as his observant eyes, at the same time that they followed his active hand, became aware of her instinctive appraising gestures. There was a moment when he frankly laughed out — there was so little in his poor studio to appraise. Mrs. Rooth's wandering eyeglass and vague polite disappointed bent back and head made a subject for a sketch on the instant: they gave such a sudden pictorial glimpse of the element of race. He found himself seeing the immemorial Jewess in her hold up a candle in a crammed back shop. There was no candle indeed and his studio was not crammed, and it had never occurred to him before that she was a grand-daughter of Israel save on the general theory, so stoutly held by several clever people, that few of us are not under suspicion. The late Rudolf Roth had at least been, and his daughter was visibly her father's child; so that, flanked by such a pair, good Semitic presumptions sufficiently crowned the mother. Receiving Miriam's sharp satiric shower without shaking her shoulders she might at any rate have

been the descendant of a tribe long persecuted. Her blandness was beyond all baiting; she professed she could be as still as a mouse. Miriam, on the other side of the room, in the tranquil beauty of her attitude — "found" indeed, as Nick had said — watched her a little and then declared she had best have been locked up at home. Putting aside her free account of the dangers to which her mother exposed her, it was n't whimsical to imagine that within the limits of that repose from which the Neville-Nugents never wholly departed the elder lady might indeed be a trifle fidgety and have something on her mind. Nick presently mentioned that it would n't be possible for him to "send home" his second performance; and he added, in the exuberance of having already got a little into relation with his work, that perhaps this did n't matter, inasmuch as — if Miriam would give him his time, to say nothing of her own — a third and a fourth masterpiece might also some day very well struggle into the light. His model rose to this without conditions, assuring him he might count upon her till she grew too old and too ugly and that nothing would make her so happy as that he should paint her as often as Romney had painted the celebrated Lady Hamilton. "Ah Lady Hamilton!" deprecated Mrs. Rooth; while Miriam, who had on occasion the candour of a fine acquisitiveness, wished to know what particular reason there might be for his not letting them have the picture he was now beginning.

"Why I've promised it to Peter Sherringham — he has offered me money for it," Nick replied. "However,

he's welcome to it for nothing, poor chap, and I shall be delighted to do the best I can for him."

Mrs. Rooth, still prowling, stopped in the middle of the room at this, while her daughter echoed: "He offered you money — just as we came in?"

"You met him then at the door with my sister? I supposed you had — he's taking her home," Nick explained.

"Your sister's a lovely girl — such an aristocratic type!" breathed Mrs. Rooth. Then she added: "I've a tremendous confession to make to you."

"Mamma's confessions have to be tremendous to correspond with her crimes," said Miriam. "She asked Miss Dormer to come and see us, suggested even that you might bring her some Sunday. I don't like the way mamma does such things — too much humility, too many *simagrées*, after all; but I also said what I could to be nice to her. Your sister *is* charming — awfully pretty and modest. If you were to press me I should tell you frankly that it seems to me rather a social muddle, this rubbing shoulders of 'nice girls' and *filles de théâtre:* I should n't think it would do your poor young things much good. However, it's their own affair, and no doubt there's no more need of their thinking we're worse than we are than of their thinking we're better. The people they live with don't seem to know the difference — I sometimes make my reflexions about the public one works for."

"Ah if you go in for the public's knowing differences you're far too particular," Nick laughed. "*D'où tombez-vous?* as you affected French people

say. If you've anything at stake on that you had simply better not play."

"Dear Mr. Dormer, don't encourage her to be so dreadful; for it *is* dreadful, the way she talks," Mrs. Rooth broke in. "One would think we were n't respectable — one would think I had never known what I've known and been what I've been."

"What one would think, beloved mother, is that you're a still greater humbug than you are. It's you, on the contrary, who go down on your knees, who pour forth apologies about our being vagabonds."

"Vagabonds — listen to her! — after the education I've given her and our magnificent prospects!" wailed Mrs. Rooth, sinking with clasped hands upon the nearest ottoman.

"Not after our prospects, if prospects they be: a good deal before them. Yes, you've taught me tongues and I'm greatly obliged to you — they no doubt give variety as well as incoherency to my conversation; and that of people in our line is for the most part notoriously monotonous and shoppy. The gift of tongues is in general the sign of your true adventurer. Dear mamma, I've no low standard — that's the last thing," Miriam went on. "My weakness is my exalted conception of respectability. Ah *parlez-moi de ça* and of the way I understand it! If I were to go in for being respectable you'd see something fine. I'm awfully conservative and I know what respectability is, even when I meet people of society on the accidental middle ground of either glowering or smirking. I know also what it is n't — it is n't the sweet union of well-bred little girls ('care-

fully-nurtured,' don't they call them?) and painted she-mummers. I should carry it much further than any of these people: I should never look at the likes of us! Every hour I live I see that the wisdom of the ages was in the experience of dear old Madame Carré — was in a hundred things she told me. She's founded on a rock. After that," Miriam went on to her host, "I can assure you that if you were so good as to bring Miss Dormer to see us we should be angelically careful of her and surround her with every attention and precaution."

"The likes of us — the likes of us!" Mrs. Rooth repeated plaintively and with a resentment as vain as a failure to sneeze. "I don't know what you're talking about and I decline to be turned upside down. I've my ideas as well as you, and I repudiate the charge of false humility. I've been through too many troubles to be proud, and a pleasant polite manner was the rule of my life even in the days when, God knows, I had everything. I've never changed and if with God's help I had a civil tongue then, I've a civil tongue now. It's more than you always have, my poor perverse passionate child. Once a lady always a lady — all the footlights in the world, turn them up as high as you will, make no difference there. And I think people know it, people who know anything — if I may use such an expression — and it's because they know it that I'm not afraid to address them in a pleasant way. So I must say — and I call Mr. Dormer to witness, for if he could reason with you a bit about it he might render several people a service — your conduct to Mr. Sherringham

simply breaks my heart," Mrs. Rooth concluded, taking a jump of several steps in the fine modern avenue of her argument.

Nick was appealed to, but he hung back, drawing with a free hand, and while he forbore Miriam took it up. "Mother's good — mother's very good; but it's only little by little that you discover how good she is." This seemed to leave him at ease to ask their companion, with the preliminary intimation that what she had just said was very striking, what she meant by her daughter's conduct to old Peter. Before Mrs. Rooth could answer this question, however, Miriam broke across with one of her own. "Do you mind telling me if you made your sister go off with Mr. Sherringham because you knew it was about time for me to turn up? Poor Mr. Dormer, I get you into trouble, don't I?" she added quite with tenderness.

"Into trouble?" echoed Nick, looking at her head but not at her eyes.

"Well, we won't talk about that!" she returned with a rich laugh.

He now hastened to say that he had nothing to do with his sister's leaving the studio — she had only come, as it happened, for a moment. She had walked away with Peter Sherringham because they were cousins and old friends: he was to leave England immediately, for a long time, and he had offered her his company going home. Mrs. Rooth shook her head very knowingly over the "long time" Mr. Sherringham would be absent — she plainly had her ideas about that; and she conscientiously related

that in the course of the short conversation they had all had at the door of the house her daughter had reminded Miss Dormer of something that had passed between them in Paris on the question of the charming young lady's modelling her head.

"I did it to make the idea of our meeting less absurd — to put it on the footing of our both being artists. I don't ask you if she has talent," said Miriam.

"Then I need n't tell you," laughed Nick.

"I'm sure she has talent and a very refined inspiration. I see something in that corner, covered with a mysterious veil," Mrs. Rooth insinuated; which led Miriam to go on immediately:

"Has she been trying her hand at Mr. Sherringham?"

"When should she try her hand, poor dear young lady? He's always sitting with *us*," said Mrs. Rooth.

"Dear mamma, you exaggerate. He has his moments — when he seems to say his prayers to me; but we've had some success in cutting them down. *Il s'est bien détachê ces-jours-ci*, and I'm very happy for him. Of course it's an impertinent allusion for me to make; but I should be so delighted if I could think of him as a little in love with Miss Dormer," the girl pursued, addressing Nick.

"He is, I think, just a little — just a tiny bit," her artist allowed, working away; while Mrs. Rooth ejaculated to her daughter simultaneously:

"How can you ask such fantastic questions when you know he's dying for *you?*"

"Oh dying!—he's dying very hard!" cried Miriam. "Mr. Sherringham's a man of whom I can't speak with too much esteem and affection and who may be destined to perish by some horrid fever (which God forbid!) in the unpleasant country he's going to. But he won't have caught his fever from your humble servant."

"You may kill him even while you remain in perfect health yourself," said Nick; "and since we're talking of the matter I don't see the harm of my confessing that he strikes me as far gone — oh as very bad indeed."

"And yet he's in love with your sister? — *je n'y suis plus.*"

"He tries to be, for he sees that as regards you there are difficulties. He'd like to put his hand on some nice girl who'd be an antidote to his poison."

"Difficulties are a mild name for them; poison even is a mild name for the ill he suffers from. The principal difficulty is that he does n't know what the devil he wants. The next is that I don't either — or what the devil I want myself. I only know what I don't want," Miriam kept on brightly and as if uttering some happy beneficent truth. "I don't want a person who takes things even less simply than I do myself. Mr. Sherringham, poor man, must be very uncomfortable, for one side of him's in a perpetual row with the other side. He's trying to serve God and Mammon, and I don't know how God will come off. What I like in you is that you've definitely let Mammon go — it's the only decent way. That's my earnest conviction, and yet they call us people

light. Dear Mr. Sherringham has tremendous ambitions — tremendous *riguardi*, as we used to say in Italy. He wants to enjoy every comfort and to save every appearance, and all without making a scrap of a sacrifice. He expects others — me, for instance — to make all the sacrifices. *Merci*, much as I esteem him and much as I owe him! I don't know how he ever came to stray at all into our bold bad downright Bohemia: it was a cruel trick for fortune to play him. He can't keep out of it, he's perpetually making dashes across the border, and yet as soon as he gets here he's on pins and needles. There's another in whose position — if I were in it — I would n't look at the likes of us!"

"I don't know much about the matter," Nick brought out after some intent smudging, "but I've an idea Peter thinks he has made or at least is making sacrifices."

"So much the better — you must encourage him, you must help him."

"I don't know what my daughter's talking about," Mrs. Rooth contributed — "she's much too paradoxical for my plain mind. But there's one way to encourage Mr. Sherringham — there's one way to help him; and perhaps it won't be a worse way for a gentleman of your good nature that it will help me at the same time. Can't I look to you, dear Mr. Dormer, to see that he does come to the theatre to-night — that he does n't feel himself obliged to stay away?"

"What danger is there of his staying away?" Nick asked.

"If he's bent on sacrifices that's a very good one to begin with," Miriam observed.

"That's the mad bad way she talks to him — she has forbidden the dear unhappy gentleman the house!" her mother cried. "She brought it up to him just now at the door — before Miss Dormer: such very odd form! She pretends to impose her commands upon him."

"Oh he'll be there — we're going to dine together," said Nick. And when Miriam asked him what that had to do with it he went on: "Why we've arranged it; I'm going, and he won't let me go alone."

"You're going? I sent you no places," his sitter objected.

"Yes, but I've got one. Why did n't you, after all I've done for you?"

She beautifully thought of it. "Because I'm so good. No matter," she added: "if Mr. Sherringham comes I won't act."

"Won't you act for me?"

"She'll act like an angel," Mrs. Rooth protested. "She might do, she might be, anything in all the world; but she won't take common pains."

"Of one thing there's no doubt," said Miriam: "that compared with the rest of us — poor passionless creatures — mamma does know what she wants."

"And what's that?" Nick enquired, chalking on.

"She wants everything."

"Never, never — I'm much more humble," retorted the old woman; upon which her daughter requested her to give then to Mr. Dormer, who was

a reasonable man and an excellent judge, a general idea of the scope of her desires.

As, however, Mrs. Rooth, sighing and deprecating, was not quick to acquit herself, the girl tried a short cut to the truth with the abrupt demand: "Do you believe for a single moment he'd marry me?"

"Why he has proposed to you — you've told me yourself — a dozen times."

"Proposed what to me?" Miriam rang out. "I've told you *that* neither a dozen times nor once, because I've never understood. He has made wonderful speeches, but has never been serious."

"You told me he had been in the seventh heaven of devotion, especially that night we went to the foyer of the Français," Mrs. Rooth insisted.

"Do you call the seventh heaven of devotion serious? He's in love with me, *je le veux bien;* he's so poisoned — Mr. Dormer vividly puts it — as to require a strong antidote; but he has never spoken to me as if he really expected me to listen to him, and he's the more of a gentleman from that fact. He knows we have n't a square foot of common ground — that a grasshopper can't set up a house with a fish. So he has taken care to say to me only more than he can possibly mean. That makes it stand just for nothing."

"Did he say more than he can possibly mean when he took formal leave of you yesterday — for ever and ever?" the old woman cried.

On which Nick re-enforced her. "And don't you call that — his taking formal leave — a sacrifice?"

"Oh he took it all back, his sacrifice, before he left the house."

"Then has that no meaning?" demanded Mrs. Rooth.

"None that I can make out," said her daughter.

"Ah I've no patience with you: you can be stupid when you will — you can be even that too!" the poor lady groaned.

"What mamma wishes me to understand and to practise is the particular way to be artful with Mr. Sherringham," said Miriam. "There are doubtless depths of wisdom and virtue in it. But I see only one art — that of being perfectly honest."

"I like to hear you talk — it makes you live, brings you out," Nick contentedly dropped. "And you sit beautifully still. All I want to say is please continue to do so: remain exactly as you are — it's rather important — for the next ten minutes."

"We're washing our dirty linen before you, but it's all right," the girl returned, "because it shows you what sort of people we are, and that's what you need to know. Don't make me vague and arranged and fine in this new view," she continued: "make me characteristic and real; make life, with all its horrid facts and truths, stick out of me. I wish you could put mother in too; make us live there side by side and tell our little story. 'The wonderful actress and her still more wonderful mamma' — don't you think that's an awfully good subject?"

Mrs. Rooth, at this, cried shame on her daughter's wanton humour, professing that she herself would never accept so much from Nick's good nature, and Miriam settled it that at any rate he was some day and in some way to do her mother, *really* do her, and so

make her, as one of the funniest persons that ever was, live on through the ages.

"She does n't believe Mr. Sherringham wants to marry me any more than you do," the girl, taking up her dispute again after a moment, represented to Nick; "but she believes — how indeed can I tell you what she believes ?— that I can work it so well, if you understand, that in the fulness of time I shall hold him in a vise. I 'm to keep him along for the present, but not to listen to him, for if I listen to him I shall lose him. It 's ingenious, it 's complicated; but I dare say you follow me."

"Don't move — don't move," said Nick. "Pardon a poor clumsy beginner."

"No, I shall explain quietly. Somehow — here it 's *very* complicated and you must n't lose the thread — I shall be an actress and make a tremendous lot of money, and somehow too (I suppose a little later) I shall become an ambassadress and be the favourite of courts. So you see it will all be delightful. Only I shall have to go very straight. Mamma reminds me of a story I once heard about the mother of a young lady who was in receipt of much civility from the pretender to a crown, which indeed he, and the young lady too, afterwards more or less wore. The old countess watched the course of events and gave her daughter the cleverest advice: '*Tiens bon, ma fille*, and you shall sit upon a throne.' Mamma wishes me to *tenir bon* — she apparently thinks there 's a danger I may n't — so that if I don't sit upon a throne I shall at least parade at the foot of one. And if before that, for ten years, I pile up

the money, they'll forgive me the way I've made it. I should hope so, if I've *tenu bon!* Only ten years is a good while to hold out, is n't it? If it is n't Mr. Sherringham it will be some one else. Mr. Sherringham has the great merit of being a bird in the hand. I'm to keep him along, I'm to be still more diplomatic than even he can be."

Mrs. Rooth listened to her daughter with an air of assumed reprobation which melted, before the girl had done, into a diverted complacent smile — the gratification of finding herself the proprietress of so much wit and irony and grace. Miriam's account of her mother's views was a scene of comedy, and there was instinctive art in the way she added touch to touch and made point upon point. She was so quiet, to oblige her painter, that only her fine lips moved — all her expression was in their charming utterance. Mrs. Rooth, after the first flutter of a less cynical spirit, consented to be sacrificed to an effect of the really high order she had now been educated to recognise; so that she scarce hesitated, when Miriam had ceased speaking, before she tittered out with the fondest indulgence: '*Comédienne!*' And she seemed to appeal to their companion. "Ain't she fascinating? That's the way she does for you!"

"It's rather cruel, is n't it," said Miriam, "to deprive people of the luxury of calling one an actress as they'd call one a liar? I represent, but I represent truly."

"Mr. Sherringham would marry you to-morrow — there's no question of ten years!" cried Mrs. Rooth with a comicality of plainness.

Miriam smiled at Nick, deprecating his horror of such talk. "Is n't it droll, the way she can't get it out of her head?" Then turning almost coaxingly to the old woman: "*Voyons*, look about you: they don't marry us like that."

"But they do — *cela se voit tous les jours.* Ask Mr. Dormer."

"Oh never! It would be as if I asked him to give us a practical proof."

"I shall never prove anything by marrying any one," Nick said. "For me that question's over."

Miriam rested kind eyes on him. "Dear me, how you must hate me!" And before he had time to reply she went on to her mother: "People marry them to make them leave the stage; which proves exactly what I say."

"Ah they offer them the finest positions," reasoned Mrs. Rooth.

"Do you want me to leave it then?"

"Oh you can manage if you will!"

"The only managing I know anything about is to do my work. If I manage that decently I shall pull through."

"But, dearest, may our work not be of many sorts?"

"I only know one," said Miriam.

At this her mother got up with a sigh. "I see you do wish to drive me into the street."

"Mamma's bewildered — there are so many paths she wants to follow, there are so many bundles of hay. As I told you, she wishes to gobble them all," the girl pursued. Then she added: "Yes, go and take the carriage; take a turn round the Park — you

always delight in that — and come back for me in an hour."

"I'm too vexed with you; the air will do me good," said Mrs. Rooth. But before she went she addressed Nick: "I've your assurance that you'll bring him then to-night?"

"Bring Peter? I don't think I shall have to drag him," Nick returned. "But you must do me the justice to remember that if I should resort to force I should do something that's not particularly in my interest — I should be magnanimous."

"We must always be that, must n't we?" moralised Mrs. Rooth.

"How could it affect your interest?" Miriam asked less abstractly.

"Yes, as you say," her mother mused at their host, "the question of marriage has ceased to exist for you."

"Mamma goes straight at it!" laughed the girl, getting up while Nick rubbed his canvas before answering. Miriam went to mamma and settled her bonnet and mantle in preparation for her drive, then stood a moment with a filial arm about her and as if waiting for their friend's explanation. This, however, when it came halted visibly.

"Why you said a while ago that if Peter was there you would n't act."

"I'll act for *him*," smiled Miriam, inconsequently caressing her mother.

"It does n't matter whom it's for!" Mrs. Rooth declared sagaciously.

"Take your drive and relax your mind," said the girl, kissing her. "Come for me in an hour;

not later — but not sooner." She went with her to the door, bundled her out, closed it behind her and came back to the position she had quitted. "*This* is the peace I want!" she gratefully cried as she settled into it.

XLV

Peter Sherringham said so little during the performance that his companion was struck by his dumbness, especially as Miriam's acting seemed to Nick magnificent. He held his breath while she was on the stage — she gave the whole thing, including the spectator's emotion, such a lift. She had not carried out her fantastic menace of not exerting herself, and, as Mrs. Rooth had said, it little mattered for whom she acted. Nick was conscious in watching her that she went through it all for herself, for the idea that possessed her and that she rendered with extraordinary breadth. She could n't open the door a part of the way to it and let it simply peep in; if it entered at all it must enter in full procession and occupy the premises in state.

This was what had happened on an occasion which, as the less tormented of our young men felt in his stall, grew larger with each throb of the responsive house; till by the time the play was half over it appeared to stretch out wide arms to the future. Nick had often heard more applause, but had never heard more attention, since they were all charmed and hushed together and success seemed to be sitting down with them. There had been of course plenty of announcement — the newspapers had abounded and the arts of the manager had taken the freest

licence; but it was easy to feel a fine universal consensus and to recognise everywhere the light spring of hope. People snatched their eyes from the stage an instant to look at each other, all eager to hand on the torch passed to them by the actress over the footlights. It was a part of the impression that she was now only showing to the full, for this time she had verse to deal with and she made it unexpectedly exquisite. She was beauty, melody, truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness. She caught up the obstreperous play in soothing entwining arms and, seeming to tread the air in the flutter of her robe, carried it into the high places of poetry, of art, of style. And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, pervaded with rosy fire, glowed back at the scene. Nick looked round in the intervals; he felt excited and flushed — the night had turned to a feast of fraternity and he expected to see people embrace each other. The crowd, the agitation, the triumph, the surprise, the signals and rumours, the heated air, his associates, near him, pointing out other figures who presumably were celebrated but whom he had never heard of, all amused him and banished every impulse to question or to compare. Miriam was as happy as some right sensation — she would have fed the memory with deep draughts.

One of the things that amused him or at least helped to fill his attention was Peter's attitude, which apparently did n't exclude criticism — rather indeed mainly implied it. This admirer never took his eyes off the

actress, but he made no remark about her and never stirred out of his chair. Nick had had from the first a plan of going round to speak to her, but as his companion evidently meant not to move he scrupled at being more forward. During their brief dinner together — they were determined not to be late —Peter had been silent, quite recklessly grave, but also, his kinsman judged, full of the wish to make it clear he was calm. In his seat he was calmer than ever and had an air even of trying to suggest that his attendance, preoccupied as he was with deeper solemnities, was more or less mechanical, the result of a conception of duty, a habit of courtesy. When during a scene in the second act — a scene from which Miriam was absent — Nick observed to him that one might judge from his reserve that he was n't pleased he replied after a moment: "I've been looking for her mistakes." And when Nick made answer to this that he certainly would n't find them he said again in an odd tone: "No, I shan't find them — I shan't find them." It might have seemed that since the girl's performance was a dazzling success he regarded his evening as rather a failure.

After the third act Nick said candidly: "My dear fellow, how can you sit here? Are n't you going to speak to her?"

To which Peter replied inscrutably: "Lord, no, never again. I bade her good-bye yesterday. She knows what I think of her form. It's very good, but she carries it a little too far. Besides, she did n't want me to come, and it's therefore more discreet to keep away from her."

"Surely it is n't an hour for discretion!" Nick cried. "Excuse me at any rate for five minutes."

He went behind and reappeared only as the curtain was rising on the fourth act; and in the interval between the fourth and the fifth he went again for a shorter time. Peter was personally detached, but he consented to listen to his companion's vivid account of the state of things on the stage, where the elation of victory had lighted up the place. The strain was over, the ship in port — they were all wiping their faces and grinning. Miriam — yes, positively — was grinning too, and she had n't asked a question about Peter nor sent him a message. They were kissing all round and dancing for joy. They were on the eve, worse luck, of a tremendous run. Peter groaned irrepressibly for this; it was, save for a slight sign a moment later, the only vibration caused in him by his cousin's report. There was but one voice of regret that they had n't put on the piece earlier, as the end of the season would interrupt the run. There was but one voice too about the fourth act — it was believed all London would rush to see the fourth act. The crowd about her was a dozen deep and Miriam in the midst of it all charming; she was receiving in the ugly place after the fashion of royalty, almost as hedged with the famous "divinity," yet with a smile and a word for each. She was really like a young queen on her accession. When she saw him, Nick, she had kissed her hand to him over the heads of the courtiers. Nick's artless comment on this was that she had such pretty manners. It made Peter laugh — apparently at his friend's conception of the

manners of a young queen. Mrs. Rooth, with a dozen shawls on her arm was as red as the kitchen-fire, but you could n't tell if Miriam were red or pale: she was so cleverly, finely made up — perhaps a little too much. Dashwood of course was greatly to the fore, but you had n't to mention his own performance to him: he took it all handsomely and would n't hear of anything but that *her* fortune was made. He did n't say much indeed, but evidently had ideas about her fortune; he nodded significant things and whistled inimitable sounds — "Heuh, heuh!" He was perfectly satisfied; moreover he looked further ahead than any one.

It was on coming back to his place after the fourth act that Nick put in, for his companion's benefit, most of these touches in his sketch of the situation. If Peter had continued to look for Miriam's mistakes he had n't yet found them: the fourth act, bristling with dangers, putting a premium on every sort of cheap effect, had rounded itself without a flaw. Sitting there alone while Nick was away he had leisure to meditate on the wonder of this — on the art with which the girl had separated passion from violence, filling the whole place and never screaming; for it had often seemed to him in London of old that the yell of theatrical emotion rang through the shrinking night like the voice of the Sunday newsboy. Miriam had never been more present to him than at this hour; but she was inextricably transmuted — present essentially as the romantic heroine she represented. His state of mind was of the strangest and he was conscious of its strangeness, just as he was conscious in his

very person of a lapse of resistance which likened itself absurdly to liberation. He felt weak at the same time that he felt inspired, and he felt inspired at the same time that he knew, or believed he knew, that his face was a blank. He saw things as a shining confusion, and yet somehow something monstrously definite kept surging out of them. Miriam was a beautiful actual fictive impossible young woman of a past age, an undiscoverable country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience and who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's own affairs. But that reality was a part of her spectator's joy, and she was not changed back to the common by his perception of the magnificent trick of art with which it was connected. Before his kinsman rejoined him Peter, taking a visiting-card from his pocket, had written on it in pencil a few words in a foreign tongue; but as at that moment he saw Nick coming in he immediately put it out of view.

The last thing before the curtain rose on the fifth act that young man mentioned his having brought a message from Basil Dashwood, who hoped they both, on leaving the theatre, would come to supper with him in company with Miriam and her mother and several others: he had prepared a little informal banquet in honour of so famous a night. At this, while the curtain was about to rise, Peter immediately took out his card again and added something — he wrote the finest small hand you could see. Nick asked him what he was doing, and he waited but an instant. "It's a word to say I can't come."

"To Dashwood? Oh I shall go," said Nick.

"Well, I hope you'll enjoy it!" his companion replied in a tone which came back to him afterwards.

When the curtain fell on the last act the people stayed, standing up in their places for acclamation. The applause shook the house — the recall became a clamour, the relief from a long tension. This was in any performance a moment Peter detested, but he stood for an instant beside Nick, who clapped, to his cousin's diplomatic sense, after the fashion of a school-boy at the pantomime. There was a veritable roar while the curtain drew back at the side most removed from our pair. Peter could see Basil Dashwood holding it, making a passage for the male "juvenile lead," who had Miriam in tow. Nick redoubled his efforts; heard the plaudits swell; saw the bows of the leading gentleman, who was hot and fat; saw Miriam, personally conducted and closer to the footlights, grow brighter and bigger and more swaying; and then became aware that his own comrade had with extreme agility slipped out of the stalls. Nick had already lost sight of him — he had apparently taken but a minute to escape from the house; and wondered at his quitting him without a farewell if he was to leave England on the morrow and they were not to meet at the hospitable Dashwood's. He wondered even what Peter was "up to," since, as he had assured him, there was no question of his going round to Miriam. He waited to see this young lady reappear three times, dragging Dashwood behind her at the second with a friendly arm,

to whom, in turn, was hooked Miss Fanny Rover, the actress entrusted in the piece with the inevitable comic relief. He went out slowly with the crowd and at the door looked again for Peter, who struck him as deficient for once in finish. He could n't know that in another direction and while he was helping the house to "rise" at its heroine, his kinsman had been particularly explicit.

On reaching the lobby Peter had pounced on a small boy in buttons, who seemed superfluously connected with a desolate refreshment-room and, from the tips of his toes, was peeping at the stage through the glazed hole in the door of a box. Into one of the child's hands he thrust the card he had drawn again from his waistcoat and into the other the largest silver coin he could find in the same receptacle, while he bent over him with words of adjuration — words the little page tried to help himself to apprehend by instantly attempting to peruse the other words written on the card.

"That's no use — it's Italian," said Peter; "only carry it round to Miss Rooth without a minute's delay. Place it in her hand and she'll give you some object — a bracelet, a glove or a flower — to bring me back as a sign that she has received it. I shall be outside; bring me there what she gives you and you shall have another shilling — only fly!"

His small messenger sounded him a moment with the sharp face of London wage-earning, and still more of London tip-earning, infancy, and vanished as swiftly as a slave of the Arabian Nights. While he waited in the lobby the audience began to pour

out, and before the urchin had come back to him he was clapped on the shoulder by Nick.

"I'm glad I have n't lost you, but why did n't you stay to give her a hand?"

"Give her a hand? I hated it."

"My dear man, I don't follow you," Nick said. "If you won't come to Dashwood's supper I fear our ways don't lie together."

"Thank him very much; say I've to get up at an unnatural hour." To this Peter added: "I think I ought to tell you she may not be there."

"Miss Rooth? Why it's all *for* her."

"I'm waiting for a word from her — she may change her mind."

Nick showed his interest. "For you? What then have you proposed?"

"I've proposed marriage," said Peter in a strange voice.

"I say —!" Nick broke out; and at the same moment Peter's messenger squeezed through the press and stood before him.

"She has given me nothing, sir," the boy announced; "but she says I'm to say 'All right!'"

Nick's stare widened. "You've proposed through *him?*"

"Aye, and she accepts. Good-night!" — on which, turning away, Peter bounded into a hansom. He said something to the driver through the roof, and Nick's eyes followed the cab as it started off. This young man was mystified, was even amused; especially when the youth in buttons, planted there and wondering too, brought forth:

"Please sir, he told me he'd give me a shilling and he've forgot it."

"Oh I can't pay you for *that!*" Nick laughed. But he fished out a dole, though was vexed at the injury to the supper.

XLVI

PETER meanwhile rolled away through the summer night to Saint John's Wood. He had put the pressure of strong words on his young friend, entreating her to drive home immediately, return there without any one, without even her mother. He wished to see her alone and for a purpose he would fully and satisfactorily explain — could n't she trust him? He besought her to remember his own situation and throw over her supper, throw over everything. He would wait for her with unspeakable impatience in Balaklava Place.

He did so, when he got there, but it had taken half an hour. Interminable seemed his lonely vigil in Miss Lumley's drawing-room, where the character of the original proprietress came out to him more than ever before in a kind of afterglow of old sociabilities, a vulgar ghostly reference. The numerous candles had been lighted for him and Mrs. Rooth's familiar fictions lay about; but his nerves forbade him the solace of a chair and a book. He walked up and down, thinking and listening, and as the long window, the balmy air permitting, stood open to the garden, he passed several times in and out. A carriage appeared to stop at the gate — then there was nothing; he heard the rare rattle of wheels and the far-off hum of London. His impatience was overwrought, and though he knew this it persisted;

it would have been no easy matter for Miriam to break away from the flock of her felicitators. Still less simple was it doubtless for her to leave poor Dashwood with his supper on his hands. Perhaps she would bring Dashwood with her, bring him to time her; she was capable of playing him — that is of playing Her Majesty's new representative to the small far-off State, or even of playing them both — that trick. Perhaps the little wretch in buttons — Peter remembered now the neglected shilling — only pretending to go round with his card, had come back with an invented answer. But how could he know, since presumably he could n't read Italian, that his answer would fit the message? Peter was sorry now that he himself had not gone round, not snatched Miriam bodily away, made sure of her and of what he wanted of her.

When forty minutes had elapsed he regarded it as proved that she would n't come, and, asking himself what he should do, determined to drive off again and seize her at her comrade's feast. Then he remembered how Nick had mentioned that this entertainment was not to be held at the young actor's lodgings but at some tavern or restaurant the name of which he had not heeded. Suddenly, however, Peter became aware with joy that this name did n't matter, for there was something at the garden-door at last. He rushed out before she had had time to ring, and saw as she stepped from the carriage that she was alone. Now that she was there, that he had this evidence she had listened to him and trusted him, all his impatience and bitterness gave way and

a flood of pleading tenderness took their place in the first words he spoke to her. It was far "dearer" of her than he had any right to dream, but she was the best and kindest creature — this showed it — as well as the most wonderful. He was really not off his head with his contradictory ways; no, before heaven he was n't, and he would explain, he would make everything clear. Everything was changed.

She stopped short in the little dusky garden, looking at him in the light of the open window. Then she called back to the coachman — they had left the garden-door open — "Wait for me, mind; I shall want you again."

"What's the matter — won't you stay?" Peter asked. "Are you going out again at this absurd hour? I won't hurt you," he gently urged. And he went back and closed the garden-door. He wanted to say to the coachman "It's no matter — please drive away." At the same time he would n't for the world have done anything offensive to her.

"I've come because I thought it better to-night, as things have turned out, to do the thing you ask me, whatever it may be," she had already begun. "That's probably what you calculated I would think, eh? What this evening has been you've seen, and I must allow that your hand's in it. That you know for yourself — that you doubtless felt as you sat there. But I confess I don't imagine what you want of me here now," she added. She had remained standing in the path.

Peter felt the irony of her "now" and how it made a fool of him, but he had been prepared for this and

for much worse. He had begged her not to think him a fool, but in truth at present he cared little if she did. Very likely he was — in spite of his plea that everything was changed: he cared little even himself. However, he spoke in the tone of intense reason and of the fullest disposition to satisfy her. This lucidity only took still more from the dignity of his change of front: his separation from her the day before had had such pretensions to being lucid. But the explanation and the justification were in the very fact, the fact that had complete possession of him. He named it when he replied to her: "I've simply overrated my strength."

"Oh I knew — I knew! That's why I entreated you not to come!" Miriam groaned. She turned away lamenting, and for a moment he thought she would retreat to her carriage. But he passed his hand into her arm, to draw her forward, and after an instant felt her yield.

"The fact is we must have this thing out," he said. Then he added as he made her go into the house, bending over her, "The failure of my strength — that was just the reason of my coming."

She broke into her laugh at these words, as she entered the drawing-room, and it made them sound pompous in their false wisdom. She flung off, as a good-natured tribute to the image of their having the thing out, a white shawl that had been wrapped round her. She was still painted and bedizened, in the splendid dress of her climax, so that she seemed protected and alienated by the character she had been acting. "Whatever it is you want — when I

understand — you'll be very brief, won't you? Do you know I've given up a charming supper for you? Mamma has gone there. I've promised to go back to them."

"You're an angel not to have let her come with you. I'm sure she wanted to," Peter made reply.

"Oh she's all right, but she's nervous." Then the girl added: "Could n't she keep you away after all?"

"Whom are you talking about?" Biddy Dormer was as absent from his mind as if she had never existed.

"The charming thing you were with this morning. Is she so afraid of obliging me? Oh she'd be so good for you!"

"Don't speak of that," Peter gravely said. "I was in perfect good faith yesterday when I took leave of you. I was — I was. But I can't — I can't: you're too unutterably dear to me."

"Oh don't — *please* don't!" Miriam wailed at this. She stood before the fireless chimney-piece with one of her hands on it. "If it's only to say that, don't you know, what's the use?"

"It is n't only to say that. I've a plan, a perfect plan: the whole thing lies clear before me."

"And what's the whole thing?"

He had to make an effort. "You say your mother's nervous. Ah if you knew how nervous I am!"

"Well, I'm not. Go on."

"Give it up — give it up!" Peter stammered.

"Give it up?" she fixed him like a mild Medusa.

"I'll marry you to-morrow if you'll renounce;

and in return for the sacrifice you make for me I'll do more for you than ever was done for a woman before."

"Renounce after to-night? Do you call that a plan?" she asked. "Those are old words and very foolish ones — you wanted something of that sort a year ago."

"Oh I fluttered round the idea at that time; we were talking in the air. I did n't really believe I could make you see it then, and certainly you did n't see it. My own future moreover was n't definite to me. I did n't know what I could offer you. But these last months have made a difference — I do know now. Now what I say is deliberate — it's deeply meditated. I simply can't live without you, and I hold that together we may do great things."

She seemed to wonder. "What sort of things?"

"The things of my profession, of my life, the things one does for one's country, the responsibility and the honour of great affairs; deeply fascinating when one's immersed in them, and more exciting really — put them even at that — than the excitements of the theatre. Care for me only a little and you'll see what they are, they'll take hold of you. Believe me, believe me," Peter pleaded; "every fibre of my being trembles in what I say to you."

"You admitted yesterday it would n't do," she made answer. "Where were the fibres of your being then?"

"They throbbed in me even more than now, and I was trying, like an ass, not to feel them. Where was this evening yesterday — where were the madden-

ing hours I've just spent? Ah you're the perfection of perfections, and as I sat there to-night you taught me what I really want."

"The perfection of perfections?" the girl echoed with the strangest smile.

"I need n't try to tell you: you must have felt to-night with such rapture what you are, what you can do. How can I give that up?" he piteously went on.

"How can *I*, my poor friend? I like your plans and your responsibilities and your great affairs, as you call them. *Voyons*, they're infantile. I've just shown that I'm a perfection of perfections: therefore it's just the moment to 'renounce,' as you gracefully say? Oh I was sure, I was sure!" And Miriam paused, resting eyes at once lighted and troubled on him as in the effort to think of some arrangement that would help him out of his absurdity. "I was sure, I mean, that if you did come your poor dear doting brain would be quite confused," she presently pursued. "I can't be a muff in public just for you, *pourtant*. Dear me, why do you like us so much?"

"Like you? I loathe you!"

"Je le vois parbleu bien!" she lightly returned. "I mean why do you feel us, judge us, understand us so well? I please you because you see, because you know; and then for that very reason of my pleasing you must adapt me to your convenience, you must take me over, as they say. You admire me as an artist and therefore want to put me into a box in which the artist will breathe her last. Ah be reasonable; you must let her live!"

"Let her live? As if I could prevent her living!" Peter cried with unmistakeable conviction. "Even if I did wish how could I prevent a spirit like yours from expressing itself? Don't talk about my putting you in a box, for, dearest child, I'm taking you out of one," he all persuasively explained. "The artist is irrepressible, eternal; she'll be in everything you are and in everything you do, and you'll go about with her triumphantly exerting your powers, charming the world, carrying everything before you."

Miriam's colour rose, through all her artificial surfaces, at this all but convincing appeal, and she asked whimsically: "Shall you like that?"

"Like my wife to be the most brilliant woman in Europe? I think I can do with it."

"Are n't you afraid of me?"

"Not a bit."

"Bravely said. How little you know me after all!" sighed the girl.

"I tell the truth," Peter ardently went on; "and you must do me the justice to admit that I've taken the time to dig deep into my feelings. I'm not an infatuated boy; I've lived, I've had experience, I've observed; in short I know what I mean and what I want. It is n't a thing to reason about; it's simply a need that consumes me. I've put it on starvation diet, but that's no use — really, it's no use, Miriam," the young man declared with a ring that spoke enough of his sincerity. "It is no question of my trusting you; it's simply a question of your trusting me. You're all right, as I've heard you say yourself; you're frank, spontaneous, generous; you're

a magnificent creature. Just quietly marry me and I'll manage you."

"'Manage' me?" The girl's inflexion was droll; it made him change colour.

"I mean I'll give you a larger life than the largest you can get in any other way. The stage is great, no doubt, but the world's greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand. We'll go in for realities instead of fables, and you'll do them far better than you do the fables."

Miriam had listened attentively, but her face that could so show things showed her despair at his perverted ingenuity. "Pardon my saying it after your delightful tributes to my worth," she returned in a moment, "but I've never listened to anything quite so grandly unreal. You think so well of me that humility itself ought to keep me silent; nevertheless I *must* utter a few shabby words of sense. I'm a magnificent creature on the stage—well and good; it's what I want to be and it's charming to see such evidence that I succeed. But off the stage, woe betide us both, I should lose all my advantages. The fact's so patent that it seems to me I'm very good-natured even to discuss it with you."

"Are you on the stage now, pray? Ah Miriam, if it were n't for the respect I owe you!" her companion wailed.

"If it were n't for that I should n't have come here to meet you. My gift is the thing that takes you: could there be a better proof than that it's to-night's display of it that has brought you to this unreason? It's indeed a misfortune that you're so

sensitive to our poor arts, since they play such tricks with your power to see things as they are. Without my share of them I should be a dull empty third-rate woman, and yet that's the fate you ask me to face and insanely pretend you're ready to face yourself."

"Without it — without it?" Sherringham cried. "Your own sophistry's infinitely worse than mine. I should like to see you without it for the fiftieth part of a second. What I ask you to give up is the dusty boards of the play-house and the flaring footlights, but not the very essence of your being. Your 'gift,' your genius, is yourself, and it's because it's yourself that I yearn for you. If it had been a thing you could leave behind by the easy dodge of stepping off the stage I would never have looked at you a second time. Don't talk to me as if I were a simpleton — with your own false simplifications! You were made to charm and console, to represent beauty and harmony and variety to miserable human beings; and the daily life of man is the theatre for that — not a vulgar shop with a turnstile that's open only once in the twenty-four hours. 'Without it,' verily!" Peter proceeded with a still, deep heat that kept down in a manner his rising scorn and exasperated passion. "Please let me know the first time you're without your face, without your voice, your step, your exquisite spirit, the turn of your head and the wonder of your look!"

Miriam at this moved away from him with a port that resembled what she sometimes showed on the stage when she turned her young back upon the footlights and then after a few steps grandly swept round

again. This evolution she performed — it was over in an instant — on the present occasion; even to stopping short with her eyes upon him and her head admirably erect. "Surely it's strange," she said, "the way the other solution never occurs to you."

"The other solution?"

"That *you* should stay on the stage."

"I don't understand you," her friend gloomed.

"Stay on *my* stage. Come off your own."

For a little he said nothing; then: "You mean that if I'll do that you'll have me?"

"I mean that if it were to occur to you to offer me a little sacrifice on your own side it might place the matter in a slightly more attractive light."

"Continue to let you act — as my wife?" he appealed. "Is it a real condition? Am I to understand that those are your terms?"

"I may say so without fear, because you'll never accept them."

"Would you accept them *from* me?" he demanded; "accept the manly, the professional sacrifice, see me throw up my work, my prospects — of course I should have to do that — and simply become your appendage?"

She raised her arms for a prodigious fall. "My dear fellow, you invite me with the best conscience in the world to become yours."

"The cases are not equal. You'd make of me the husband of an actress. I should make of you the wife of an ambassador."

"The husband of an actress, *c'est bientôt dit*, in that tone of scorn! If you're consistent," said Miriam,

all lucid and hard, "it ought to be a proud position for you."

"What do you mean, if I'm consistent?"

"Have n't you always insisted on the beauty and interest of our art and the greatness of our mission? Have n't you almost come to blows with poor Gabriel Nash about it? What did all that mean if you won't face the first consequences of your theory? Either it was an enlightened conviction or it was an empty pretence. If you were only talking against time I'm glad to know it," she rolled out with a darkening eye. "The better the cause, it seems to me, the better the deed; and if the theatre *is* important to the 'human spirit,' as you used to say so charmingly, and if into the bargain you've the pull of being so fond of me, I don't see why it should be monstrous of you to give us your services in an intelligent indirect way. Of course if you're not serious we need n't talk at all; but if you are, with your conception of what the actor can do, why is it so base to come to the actor's aid, taking one devotion with another? If I'm so fine I'm worth looking after a bit, and the place where I'm finest is the place to look after me!"

He had a long pause again, taking her in as it seemed to him he had never done. "You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest domesticity of private life. I've no conception whatever of what the actor can do, and no theory whatever about the importance of the theatre. Any infatuation of that sort has completely dropped from me, and for all I care the theatre may go to the dogs — which I judge it altogether probably will!"

"You're dishonest, you're ungrateful, you're false!" Miriam flashed. "It was the theatre brought you here — if it had n't been for the theatre I never would have looked at you. It was in the name of the theatre you first made love to me; it 's to the theatre you owe every advantage that, so far as I 'm concerned, you possess."

"I seem to possess a great many!" poor Peter derisively groaned.

"You might avail yourself better of those you have! You make me angry, but I want to be fair," said the shining creature, "and I can't be unless you are. You're not fair, nor candid, nor honourable, when you swallow your words and abjure your faith, when you throw over old friends and old memories for a selfish purpose."

"'Selfish purpose' is, in your own convenient idiom, *bientôt dit*," Peter promptly answered. "I suppose you consider that if I truly esteemed you I should be ashamed to deprive the world of the light of your genius. Perhaps my esteem is n't of the right quality — there are different kinds, are n't there? At any rate I've explained to you that I propose to deprive the world of nothing at all. You shall be celebrated, *allez!*"

"Vain words, vain words, my dear!" and she turned off again in her impatience. "I know of course," she added quickly, "that to befool yourself with such twaddle you must be pretty bad."

"Yes, I 'm pretty bad," he admitted, looking at her dismally. "What do you do with the declaration you made me the other day — the day I found my

cousin here — that you'd take me if I should come to you as one who had risen high?"

Miriam thought of it. "I remember — the chaff about the honours, the orders, the stars and garters. My poor foolish friend, don't be so painfully literal. Don't you know a joke when you see it? It was to worry your cousin, was n't it? But it did n't in the least succeed."

"Why should you wish to worry my cousin?"

"Because he's so provoking!" she instantly answered; after which she laughed as if for her falling too simply into the trap he had laid. "Surely, at all events, I had my freedom no less than I have it now. Pray what explanations should I have owed you and in what fear of you should I have gone? However, that has nothing to do with it. Say I did tell you that we might arrange it on the day you should come to me covered with glory in the shape of little tinkling medals: why should you anticipate that transaction by so many years and knock me down such a long time in advance? Where's the glory, please, and where are the medals?"

"Dearest girl, am I not going to strange parts — a capital promotion — next month," he insistently demanded, "and can't you trust me enough to believe I speak with a real appreciation of the facts (that I'm not lying to you in short) when I tell you I've my foot in the stirrup? The glory's dawning. *I*'m all right too."

"What you propose to me then is to accompany you *tout bonnement* to your new post. What you propose to me is to pack up and start?"

"You put it in a nutshell." But Peter's smile was strained.

"You're touching — it has its charm. But you can't get anything in any of the Americas, you know. I'm assured there are no medals to be picked up in those parts — which are therefore 'strange' indeed. That's why the diplomatic body hate them all."

"They're on the way, they're on the way!" — he could only feverishly hammer. "The people here don't keep us long in disagreeable places unless we want to stay. There's one thing you can get anywhere if you've ability, and nowhere if you've not, and in the disagreeable places generally more than in the others; and that — since it's the element of the question we're discussing — is simply success. It's odious to be put on one's swagger, but I protest against being treated as if I had nothing to offer — to offer a person who has such glories of her own. I'm not a little presumptuous ass; I'm a man accomplished and determined, and the omens are on my side." Peter faltered a moment and then with a queer expression went on: "Remember, after all, that, strictly speaking, your glories are also still in the future." An exclamation at these words burst from Miriam's lips, but her companion resumed quickly: "Ask my official superiors, ask any of my colleagues, if they consider I've nothing to offer."

He had an idea as he ceased speaking that she was on the point of breaking out with some strong word of resentment at his allusion to the contingent nature of her prospects. But it only deepened his wound to hear her say with extraordinary mildness: "It's

perfectly true that my glories are still to come, that I may fizzle out and that my little success of to-day is perhaps a mere flash in the pan. Stranger things have been — something of that sort happens every day. But don't we talk too much of that part of it?" she asked with a weary patience that was noble in its effect. "Surely it's vulgar to think only of the noise one's going to make — especially when one remembers how utterly *bêtes* most of the people will be among whom one makes it. It is n't to my possible glories I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined to betray me and sink me. I like it better than anything else — a thousand times better (I'm sorry to have to put it in such a way) than tossing up my head as the fine lady of a little coterie."

"A little coterie? I don't know what you're talking about!" — for this at least Peter could fight.

"A big coterie then! It's only that at the best. A nasty prim 'official' woman who's perched on her little local pedestal and thinks she's a queen for ever because she's ridiculous for an hour! Oh you need n't tell me. I've seen them abroad — the dreariest females — and could imitate them here. I could do one for you on the spot if I were n't so tired. It's scarcely worth mentioning perhaps all this while — but I'm ready to drop." She picked up the white mantle she had tossed off, flinging it round her with her usual amplitude of gesture. "They're waiting for me and I confess I'm hungry. If I don't hurry they'll eat up all the nice things. Don't say I have n't been obliging, and come back when you're better. Good-night."

"I quite agree with you that we've talked too much about the vulgar side of our question," Peter returned, walking round to get between her and the French window by which she apparently had a view of leaving the room. "That's because I've wanted to bribe you. Bribery's almost always vulgar."

"Yes, you should do better. *Merci!* There's a cab: some of them have come for me. I must go," she added, listening for a sound that reached her from the road.

Peter listened too, making out no cab. "Believe me, it is n't wise to turn your back on such an affection as mine and on such a confidence," he broke out again, speaking almost in a warning tone — there was a touch of superior sternness in it, as of a rebuke for real folly, but it was meant to be tender — and stopping her within a few feet of the window. "Such things are the most precious that life has to give us," he added all but didactically.

She had listened once more for a little; then she appeared to give up the idea of the cab. The reader need hardly be told that at this stage of her youthful history the right way for her lover to take her would n't have been to picture himself as acting for her highest good. "I like your calling the feeling with which I inspire you confidence," she presently said; and the deep note of the few words had something of the distant mutter of thunder.

"What is it then, when I offer you everything I have, everything I am, everything I shall ever be?"

She seemed to measure him as for the possible

success of an attempt to pass him. But she remained where she was. "I'm sorry for you, yes, but I'm also rather ashamed."

"Ashamed of *me?*"

"A brave offer to see me through — that's what I should call confidence. You say to-day that you hate the theatre — and do you know what has made you do it? The fact that it has too large a place in your mind to let you disown it and throw it over with a good conscience. It has a deep fascination for you, and yet you're not strong enough to do so enlightened and public a thing as take up with it in my person. You're ashamed of yourself for that, as all your constant high claims for it are on record; so you blaspheme against it to try and cover your retreat and your treachery and straighten out your personal situation. But it won't do, dear Mr. Sherringham — it won't do at all," Miriam proceeded with a triumphant, almost judicial lucidity which made her companion stare; "you have n't the smallest excuse of stupidity, and your perversity is no excuse whatever. Leave her alone altogether — a poor girl who's making her way — or else come frankly to help her, to give her the benefit of your wisdom. Don't lock her up for life under the pretence of doing her good. What does one most good is to see a little honesty. You're the best judge, the best critic, the best observer, the best *believer*, that I've ever come across; you're committed to it by everything you've said to me for a twelvemonth, by the whole turn of your mind, by the way you've followed us up, all of us, from far back. If an art's noble and beneficent one

should n't be afraid to offer it one's arm. Your cousin is n't: he can make sacrifices."

"My cousin?" Peter amazedly echoed. "Why, was n't it only the other day you were throwing his sacrifices in his teeth?"

Under this imputation on her straightness Miriam flinched but for an instant. "I did that to worry *you*," she smiled.

"Why should you wish to worry me if you care so little about me?"

"Care little about you? Have n't I told you often, did n't I tell you yesterday, how much I care? Ain't I showing it now by spending half the night here with you — giving myself away to all those cynics — taking all this trouble to persuade you to hold up your head and have the courage of your opinions?"

"You invent my opinions for your convenience," said Peter all undaunted. "As long ago as the night I introduced you, in Paris, to Mademoiselle Voisin, you accused me of looking down on those who practise your art. I remember how you came down on me because I did n't take your friend Dashwood seriously enough. Perhaps I did n't; but if already at that time I was so wide of the mark you can scarcely accuse me of treachery now."

"I don't remember, but I dare say you're right," Miriam coldly meditated. "What I accused you of then was probably simply what I reproach you with now — the germ at least of your deplorable weakness. You consider that we do awfully valuable work, and yet you would n't for the world let people suppose you really take our side. If your position was even

at that time so false, so much the worse for you, that's all. Oh it's refreshing," his formidable friend exclaimed after a pause during which Peter seemed to himself to taste the full bitterness of despair, so baffled and cheapened he intimately felt—"oh it's refreshing to see a man burn his ships in a cause that appeals to him, give up something precious for it and break with horrid timidities and snobberies! It's the most beautiful sight in the world."

Poor Peter, sore as he was, and with the cold breath of failure in his face, nevertheless burst out laughing at this fine irony. "You're magnificent, you give me at this moment the finest possible illustration of what you mean by burning one's ships. Verily, verily there's no one like you: talk of timidity, talk of refreshment! If I had any talent for it I'd go on the stage to-morrow, so as to spend my life with you the better."

"If you'll do that I'll be your wife the day after your first appearance. That would be really respectable," Miriam said.

"Unfortunately I've no talent."

"That would only make it the more respectable."

"You're just like poor Nick," Peter returned—"you've taken to imitating Gabriel Nash. Don't you see that it's only if it were a question of my going on the stage myself that there would be a certain fitness in your contrasting me invidiously with Nick and in my giving up one career for another? But simply to stand in the wing and hold your shawl and your smelling-bottle—!" he concluded mournfully, as if he had ceased to debate.

"Holding my shawl and my smelling-bottle is a mere detail, representing a very small part of the whole precious service, the protection and encouragement, for which a woman in my position might be indebted to a man interested in her work and as accomplished and determined as you very justly describe yourself."

"And would it be your idea that such a man should live on the money earned by an exhibition of the person of his still more accomplished and still more determined wife?"

"Why not if they work together — if there's something of his spirit and his support in everything she does?" Miriam demanded. "*Je vous attendais* with the famous 'person'; of course that's the great stick they beat us with. Yes, we show it for money, those of us who have anything decent to show, and some no doubt who have n't, which is the real scandal. What will you have? It's only the envelope of the idea, it's only our machinery, which ought to be conceded to us; and in proportion as the idea takes hold of us do we become unconscious of the clumsy body. Poor old 'person' — if you knew what *we* think of it! If you don't forget it that's your own affair: it shows you're dense before the idea."

"That *I*'m dense?" — and Peter appealed to their lamplit solitude, the favouring intimate night that only witnessed his defeat, as if this outrage had been all that was wanting.

"I mean the public is — the public who pays us. After all, they expect us to look at *them* too, who are not half so well worth it. If you should see

some of the creatures who have the face to plant themselves there in the stalls before one for three mortal hours! I dare say it would be simpler to have no bodies, but we're all in the same box, and it would be a great injustice to the idea, and we're all showing ourselves all the while; only some of us are not worth paying."

"You're extraordinarily droll, but somehow I can't laugh at you," he said, his handsome face drawn by his pain to a contraction sufficiently attesting the fact. "Do you remember the second time I ever saw you — the day you recited at my place?" he abruptly asked; a good deal as if he were taking from his quiver an arrow which, if it was the last, was also one of the sharpest.

"Perfectly, and what an idiot I was, though it was only yesterday!"

"You expressed to me then a deep detestation of the sort of self-exposure to which the profession you were taking up would commit you. If you compared yourself to a contortionist at a country fair I'm only taking my cue from you."

"I don't know what I may have said then," replied Miriam, whose steady flight was not arrested by this ineffectual bolt; "I was no doubt already wonderful for talking of things I know nothing about. I was only on the brink of the stream and I perhaps thought the water colder than it is. One warms it a bit one's self when once one's in. Of course I'm a contortionist and of course there's a hateful side, but don't you see how that very fact puts a price on every compensation, on the help of those who are

ready to insist on the *other* side, the grand one, and especially on the sympathy of the person who's ready to insist most and to keep before us the great thing, the element that makes up for everything?"

"The element —?" Peter questioned with a vagueness that was pardonably exaggerated. "Do you mean your success?"

"I mean what you've so often been eloquent about," she returned with an indulgent shrug — "the way we simply stir people's souls. Ah there's where life can help us," she broke out with a change of tone, "there's where human relations and affections can help us; love and faith and joy and suffering and experience — I don't know what to call 'em! They suggest things, they light them up and sanctify them, as you may say; they make them appear worth doing." She became radiant a while, as if with a splendid vision; then melting into still another accent, which seemed all nature and harmony and charity, she proceeded: "I must tell you that in the matter of what we can do for each other I have a tremendously high ideal. I go in for closeness of union, for identity of interest. A true marriage, as they call it, must do one a lot of good!"

He stood there looking at her for a time during which her eyes sustained his penetration without a relenting gleam, some lapse of cruelty or of paradox. But with a passionate inarticulate sound he turned away, to remain, on the edge of the window, his hands in his pockets, gazing defeatedly, doggedly, into the featureless night, into the little black garden which had nothing to give him but a familiar smell

of damp. The warm darkness had no relief for him, and Miriam's histrionic hardness flung him back against a fifth-rate world, against a bedimmed star-punctured nature which had no consolation — the bleared irresponsive eyes of the London firmament. For the brief space of his glaring at these things he dumbly and helplessly raged. What he wanted was something that was not in *that* thick prospect. What was the meaning of this sudden offensive importunity of "art," this senseless mocking catch, like some irritating chorus of conspirators in a bad opera, in which her voice was so incongruously conjoined with Nick's and in which Biddy's sweet little pipe had not scrupled still more bewilderingly to mingle? Art might yield to damnation: what commission after all had he ever given it to better him or bother him? If the pointless groan in which Peter exhaled a part of his humiliation had been translated into words, these words would have been as heavily charged with a genuine British mistrust of the uncanny principle as if the poor fellow speaking them had never quitted his island. Several acquired perceptions had struck a deep root in him, but an immemorial compact formation lay deeper still. He tried at the present hour to rest on it spiritually, but found it inelastic; and at the very moment when most conscious of this absence of the rebound or of any tolerable ease he felt his vision solicited by an object which, as he immediately guessed, could only add to the complication of things.

An undefined shape hovered before him in the garden, halfway between the gate and the house;

it remained outside of the broad shaft of lamplight projected from the window. It wavered for a moment after it had become aware of his observation and then whisked round the corner of the lodge. This characteristic movement so effectually dispelled the mystery — it could only be Mrs. Rooth who resorted to such conspicuous secrecies — that, to feel the game up and his interview over, he had no need to see the figure reappear on second thoughts and dodge about in the dusk with a sportive vexatious vagueness. Evidently Miriam's warning of a few minutes before had been founded: a cab had deposited her anxious mother at the garden-door. Mrs. Rooth had entered with precautions; she had approached the house and retreated; she had effaced herself — had peered and waited and listened. Maternal solicitude and muddled calculations had drawn her from a feast as yet too imperfectly commemorative. The heroine of the occasion of course had been intolerably missed, so that the old woman had both obliged the company and quieted her own nerves by jumping insistently into a hansom and rattling up to Saint John's Wood to reclaim the absentee. But if she had wished to be in time she had also desired not to be impertinent, and would have been still more embarrassed to say what she aspired to promote than to phrase what she had proposed to hinder. She wanted to abstain tastefully, to interfere felicitously, and, more generally and justifiably — the small hours having come — to see what her young charges were "up to." She would probably have gathered that they were quarrelling,

and she appeared now to be motioning to Peter to know if it were over. He took no notice of her signals, if signals they were; he only felt that before he made way for the poor odious lady there was one small spark he might strike from Miriam's flint.

Without letting her guess that her mother was on the premises he turned again to his companion, half-expecting she would have taken her chance to regard their discussion as more than terminated and by the other egress flit away from him in silence. But she was still there; she was in the act of approaching him with a manifest intention of kindness, and she looked indeed, to his surprise, like an angel of mercy.

"Don't let us part so harshly," she said—"with your trying to make me feel as if I were merely disobliging. It's no use talking—we only hurt each other. Let us hold our tongues like decent people and go about our business. It is n't as if you had n't any cure—when you've such a capital one. Try it, try it, my dear friend—you'll see! I wish you the highest promotion and the quickest—every success and every reward. When you've got them all, some day, and I've become a great swell too, we'll meet on that solid basis and you'll be glad I've been dreadful now."

"Surely before I leave you I've a right to ask you this," he answered, holding fast in both his own the cool hand of farewell she had chosen finally to torment him with. "Are you ready to follow up by a definite promise your implied assurance that I've a remedy?"

"A definite promise?" Miriam benignly gazed — it was the perfection of indirectness. "I don't 'imply' that you've a remedy. I declare it on the house-tops. That delightful girl —"

"I'm not talking of any delightful girl but you!" he broke in with a voice that, as he afterwards learned, struck Mrs. Rooth's ears in the garden with affright. "I simply hold you, under pain of being convicted of the grossest prevarication, to the strict sense of what you said ten minutes ago."

"Ah I've said so many things! One has to do that to get rid of you. You rather hurt my hand," she added — and jerked it away in a manner showing that if she was an angel of mercy her mercy was partly for herself.

"As I understand you then I may have some hope if I do renounce my profession?" Peter pursued. "If I break with everything, my prospects, my studies, my training, my emoluments, my past and my future, the service of my country and the ambition of my life, and engage to take up instead the business of watching your interests so far as I may learn how and ministering to your triumphs so far as may in me lie — if after further reflexion I decide to go through these preliminaries, have I your word that I may definitely look to you to reward me with your precious hand?"

"I don't think you've any right to put the question to me now," she returned with a promptitude partly produced perhaps by the clear-cut form his solemn speech had given — there was a charm in the sound of it — to each item of his enumeration. "The case

is so very contingent, so dependent on what you ingeniously call your further reflexion. While you really reserve everything you ask me to commit myself. If it's a question of further reflexion why did you drag me up here? And then," she added, "I'm so far from wishing you to take any such monstrous step."

"Monstrous you call it? Just now you said it would be sublime."

"Sublime if it's done with spontaneity, with passion; ridiculous if it's done 'after further reflexion.' As you said, perfectly, a while ago, it is n't a thing to reason about."

"Ah what a help you'd be to me in diplomacy!" Peter yearningly cried. "Will you give me a year to consider?"

"Would you trust *me* for a year?"

"Why not, if I'm ready to trust you for life?"

"Oh I should n't be free then, worse luck. And how much you seem to take for granted one must like you!"

"Remember," he could immediately say, "that you've made a great point of your liking me. Would n't you do so still more if I were heroic?"

She showed him, for all her high impatience now, the interest of a long look. "I think I should pity you in such a cause. Give it all to *her;* don't throw away a real happiness!"

"Ah you can't back out of your position with a few vague and even rather impertinent words!" Peter protested. "You accuse me of swallowing my opinions, but you swallow your pledges. You've painted

in heavenly colours the sacrifice I'm talking of, and now you must take the consequences."

"The consequences?"

"Why my coming back in a year to square you."

"Ah you're a bore!" — she let him have it at last. "Come back when you like. I don't wonder you've grown desperate, but fancy *me* then!" she added as she looked past him at a new interlocutor.

"Yes, but if he'll square you!" Peter heard Mrs. Rooth's voice respond all persuasively behind him. She had stolen up to the window now, had passed the threshold, was in the room, but her daughter had not been startled. "What is it he wants to do, dear?" she continued to Miriam.

"To induce me to marry him if he'll go upon the stage. He'll practise over there — where he's going — and then come back and appear. Is n't it too dreadful? Talk him out of it, stay with him, soothe him!" the girl hurried on. "You'll find some drinks and some biscuits in the cupboard — keep him with you, pacify him, give him *his* little supper. Meanwhile I'll go to mine; I'll take the brougham; don't follow!"

With which words Miriam bounded into the garden, her white drapery shining for an instant in the darkness before she disappeared. Peter looked about him to pick up his hat, but while he did so heard the bang of the gate and the quick carriage get into motion. Mrs. Rooth appeared to sway violently and in opposed directions: that of the impulse to rush after Miriam and that of the extraordinary possibility to which the young lady had alluded. She was in

doubt, yet at a venture, detaining him with a maternal touch, she twinkled up at their visitor like an insinuating glow-worm. "I'm so glad you came."

"I'm not. I've got nothing by it," Peter said as he found his hat.

"Oh it was so beautiful!" she declared.

"The play — yes, wonderful. I'm afraid it's too late for me to avail myself of the privilege your daughter offers me. Good-night."

"Ah it's a pity; won't you take *anything?*" asked Mrs. Rooth. "When I heard your voice so high I was scared and hung back." But before he could reply she added: "Are you really thinking of the stage?"

"It comes to the same thing."

"Do you mean you've proposed?"

"Oh unmistakeably."

"And what does she say?"

"Why you heard: she says I'm an ass."

"Ah the little wretch!" laughed Mrs. Rooth. "Leave her to me. I'll help you. But you *are* mad. Give up nothing — least of all your advantages."

"I won't give up your daughter," said Peter, reflecting that if this was cheap it was at any rate good enough for Mrs. Rooth. He mended it a little indeed by adding darkly: "But you can't make her take me."

"I can prevent her taking any one else."

"Oh *can* you?" Peter cried with more scepticism than ceremony.

"You'll see — you'll see." He passed into the garden, but, after she had blown out the candles

and drawn the window to, Mrs. Rooth went with him. "All you've got to do is to be yourself — to be true to your fine position," she explained as they proceeded. "Trust me with the rest — trust me and be quiet."

"How can one be quiet after this magnificent evening?"

"Yes, but it's just that!" panted the eager old woman. "It has launched her so on this sea of dangers that to make up for the loss of the old security (don't you know?) we must take a still firmer hold."

"Aye, of what?" Peter asked as Mrs. Rooth's comfort became vague while she stopped with him at the garden-door.

"Ah you know: of the *real* life, of the true anchor!" Her hansom was waiting for her and she added: "I kept it, you see; but a little extravagance on the night one's fortune has come! —"

Peter stared. Yes, there were people whose fortune had come; but he managed to stammer: "Are you following her again?"

"For you — for you!" And she clambered into the vehicle. From the seat, enticingly, she offered him the place beside her. "Won't you come too? I know he invited you." Peter declined with a quick gesture and as he turned away he heard her call after him, to cheer him on his lonely walk: "I shall keep this up; I shall never lose sight of her!"

BOOK EIGHTH

XLVII

When Mrs. Dallow returned to London just before London broke up the fact was immediately known in Calcutta Gardens and was promptly communicated to Nick Dormer by his sister Bridget. He had learnt it in no other way — he had had no correspondence with Julia during her absence. He gathered that his mother and sisters were not ignorant of her whereabouts — he never mentioned her name to them — but as to this he was not sure if the source of their information had been the *Morning Post* or a casual letter received by the inscrutable Biddy. He knew Biddy had some epistolary commerce with Julia; he had an impression Grace occasionally exchanged letters with Mrs. Gresham. Biddy, however, who, as he was also well aware, was always studying what he would like, forbore to talk to him about the absent mistress of Harsh beyond once dropping the remark that she had gone from Florence to Venice and was enjoying gondolas and sunsets too much to leave them. Nick's comment on this was that she was a happy woman to have such a go at Titian and Tintoret: as he spoke, and for some time afterwards, the sense of how he himself should enjoy a like "go" made him ache with ineffectual longing.

He had forbidden himself at the present to think of absence, not only because it would be inconvenient

and expensive, but because it would be a kind of retreat from the enemy, a concession to difficulty. The enemy was no particular person and no particular body of persons: not his mother; not Mr. Carteret, who, as he heard from the doctor at Beauclere, lingered on, sinking and sinking till his vitality appeared to have the vertical depth of a gold-mine; not his pacified constituents, who had found a healthy diversion in returning another Liberal wholly without Mrs. Dallow's aid (she had not participated even to the extent of a responsive telegram in the election); not his late colleagues in the House, nor the biting satirists of the newspapers, nor the brilliant women he took down at dinner-parties — there was only one sense in which he ever took them down; not in short his friends, his foes, his private thoughts, the periodical phantom of his shocked father: the enemy was simply the general awkwardness of his situation. This awkwardness was connected with the sense of responsibility so greatly deprecated by Gabriel Nash, Gabriel who had ceased to roam of late on purpose to miss as few scenes as possible of the drama, rapidly growing dull alas, of his friend's destiny; but that compromising relation scarcely drew the soreness from it. The public flurry produced by his collapse had only been large enough to mark the flatness of our young man's position when it was over. To have had a few jokes cracked audibly at your expense was n't an ordeal worth talking of; the hardest thing about it was merely that there had not been enough of them to yield a proportion of good ones. Nick had felt in fine the benefit of living

in an age and in a society where number and pressure have, for the individual figure, especially when it's a zero, compensations almost equal to their cruelties.

No, the pinch for his conscience after a few weeks had passed was simply an acute mistrust of the superficiality of performance into which the desire to justify himself might hurry him. That desire was passionate as regards Julia Dallow; it was ardent also as regards his mother; and, to make it absolutely uncomfortable, it was complicated with the conviction that neither of them would know his justification even when she should see it. They probably could n't know it if they would, and very certainly would n't if they could. He assured himself, however, that this limitation would n't matter; it was their affair — his own was simply to have the right sort of thing to show. The work he was now attempting was n't the right sort of thing, though doubtless Julia for instance would dislike it almost as much as if it were. The two portraits of Miriam, after the first exhilaration of his finding himself at large, filled him with no private glee: they were not in the direction in which he wished for the present really to move. There were moments when he felt almost angry, though of course he held his tongue, when by the few persons who saw them they were pronounced wonderfully clever. That they were wonderfully clever was just the detestable thing in them, so active had that cleverness been in making them seem better than they were. There were people to whom he would have been ashamed to show them, and these were the people whom it would give him

most pleasure some day to please. Not only had he many an hour of disgust at his actual work, but he thought he saw as in an ugly revelation that nature had cursed him with an odious facility and that the lesson of his life, the sternest and wholesomest, would be to keep out of the trap it had laid for him. He had fallen into this trap on the threshold and had only scrambled out with his honour. He had a talent for appearance, and that was the fatal thing; he had a damnable suppleness and a gift of immediate response, a readiness to oblige, that made him seem to take up causes which he really left lying, enabled him to learn enough about them in an hour to have all the air of having converted them to his use. Many people used them — that was the only thing to be said — who had taken them in much less. He was at all events too clever by half, since this pernicious overflow had wrecked most of his attempts. He had assumed a virtue and enjoyed assuming it, and the assumption had cheated his father and his mother and his affianced wife and his rich benefactor and the candid burgesses of Harsh and the cynical reporters of the newspapers. His enthusiasms had been but young curiosity, his speeches had been young agility, his professions and adhesions had been like postage-stamps without glue: the head was all right, but they would n't stick. He stood ready now to wring the neck of the irrepressible vice that certainly would tend to nothing so much as to get him into further trouble. His only real justification would be to turn patience — his own of course — inside out; yet if there should be a way to misread that recipe

his humbugging genius could be trusted infallibly to discover it. Cheap and easy results would dangle before him, little amateurish conspicuities at exhibitions helped by his history; putting it in his power to triumph with a quick "What do you say to that?" over those he had wounded. The fear of this danger was corrosive; it poisoned even lawful joys. If he should have a striking picture at the Academy next year it would n't be a crime; yet he could n't help suspecting any conditions that would enable him to be striking so soon. In this way he felt quite enough how Gabriel Nash had "had" him whenever railing at his fever for proof, and how inferior as a productive force the desire to win over the ill-disposed might be to the principle of quiet growth. Nash had a foreign manner of lifting up his finger and waving it before him, as if to put an end to everything, whenever it became, in conversation or discussion, to any extent a question whether any one would "like" anything.

It was presumably in some degree at least a due respect for the principle of quiet growth that kept Nick on the spot at present, made him stick fast to Rosedale Road and Calcutta Gardens and deny himself the simplifications of absence. Do what he would he could n't despoil himself of the impression that the disagreeable was somehow connected with the salutary, and the "quiet" with the disagreeable, when stubbornly borne; so he resisted a hundred impulses to run away to Paris or to Florence, coarse forms of the temptation to persuade himself by material motion that he was launched. He stayed in London

because it seemed to him he was there more conscious of what he had undertaken, and he had a horror of shirking the consciousness. One element in it indeed was his noting how little convenience he could have found in a foreign journey even had his judgement approved such a subterfuge. The stoppage of his supplies from Beauclere had now become an historic fact, with something of the majesty of its class about it: he had had time to see what a difference this would make in his life. His means were small and he had several old debts, the number of which, as he believed, loomed large to his mother's imagination. He could never tell her she exaggerated, because he told her nothing of that sort in these days: they had no intimate talk, for an impenetrable partition, a tall bristling hedge of untrimmed misconceptions, had sprung up between them. Poor Biddy had made a hole in it through which she squeezed from side to side, to keep up communications, at the cost of many rents and scratches; but Lady Agnes walked straight and stiff, never turning her head, never stopping to pluck the least little daisy of consolation. It was in this manner she wished to signify that she had accepted her wrongs. She draped herself in them as in a Roman mantle and had never looked so proud and wasted and handsome as now that her eyes rested only on ruins.

Nick was extremely sorry for her, though he marked as a dreadful want of grace her never setting a foot in Rosedale Road — she mentioned his studio no more than if it had been a private gambling-house or something worse; sorry because he was well aware

that for the hour everything must appear to her to have crumbled. The luxury of Broadwood would have to crumble: his mind was very clear about that. Biddy's prospects had withered to the finest dreariest dust, and Biddy indeed, taking a lesson from her brother's perversities, seemed little disposed to better a bad business. She professed the most peace-making sentiments, but when it came really to doing something to brighten up the scene she showed herself portentously corrupt. After Peter Sherringham's heartless flight she had wantonly slighted an excellent opportunity to repair her misfortune. Lady Agnes had reason to infer, about the end of June, that young Mr. Grindon, the only son — the other children being girls — of an immensely rich industrial and political baronet in the north, was literally waiting for the faintest sign. This reason she promptly imparted to her younger daughter, whose intelligence had to take it in but who had shown it no other consideration. Biddy had set her charming face as a stone; she would have nothing to do with signs, and she, practically speaking, wilfully, wickedly refused a magnificent offer, so that the young man carried his high expectations elsewhere. How much in earnest he had been was proved by the fact that before Goodwood had come and gone he was captured by Lady Muriel Macpherson. It was superfluous to insist on the frantic determination to get married written on such an accident as that. Nick knew of this episode only through Grace, and he deplored its having occurred in the midst of other disasters.

He knew or he suspected something more as

well — something about his brother Percival which, should it come to light, no phase of their common history would be genial enough to gloss over. It had usually been supposed that Percy's store of comfort against the ills of life was confined to the infallibility of his rifle. He was not sensitive, and his use of that weapon represented a resource against which common visitations might have spent themselves. It had suddenly come to Nick's ears, however, that he cultivated a concurrent support in the person of a robust countrywoman, housed in an ivied corner of Warwickshire, in whom he had long been interested and whom, without any flourish of magnanimity, he had ended by making his wife. The situation of the latest born of the pledges of this affection, a blooming boy — there had been two or three previously — was therefore perfectly regular and of a nature to make a difference in the worldly position, as the phrase ran, of his moneyless uncle. If there be degrees in the absolute and Percy had an heir — others moreover supposedly following — Nick would have to regard himself as still more moneyless than before. His brother's last step was doubtless, given the case, to be commended; but such discoveries were enlivening only when made in other families, and Lady Agnes would scarcely enjoy learning to what tune she had become a grandmother.

Nick forbore from delicacy to intimate to Biddy that he thought it a pity she could n't care for Mr. Grindon; but he had a private sense that if she had been capable of such a feat it would have lightened a little the weight he himself had to carry. He bore

her a slight grudge, which lasted till Julia Dallow came back; when the circumstance of the girl's being summoned immediately down to Harsh created a diversion that was perhaps after all only fanciful. Biddy, as we know, entertained a theory, which Nick had found occasion to combat, that Mrs. Dallow had not treated him perfectly well; therefore in going to Harsh the very first time that relative held out a hand to her so jealous a little sister must have recognised a special inducement. The inducement might have been that the relative had comfort for her, that she was acting by her cousin's direct advice, that they were still in close communion on the question of the offers Biddy was not to accept, that in short Peter's sister had taken upon herself to see that their young friend should remain free for the day of the fugitive's inevitable return. Once or twice indeed Nick wondered if Julia had herself been visited, in a larger sense, by the thought of retracing her steps — if she wished to draw out her young friend's opinion as to how she might do that gracefully. During the few days she was in town Nick had seen her twice in Great Stanhope Street, but neither time alone. She had said to him on one of these occasions in her odd explosive way: "I should have thought you'd have gone away somewhere — it must be such a bore." Of course she firmly believed he was staying for Miriam, which he really was not; and probably she had written this false impression off to Peter, who, still more probably, would prefer to regard it as just. Nick was staying for Miriam only in the sense that he should be very glad of the money he might receive for the portrait he was

engaged in painting. That money would be a great convenience to him in spite of the obstructive ground Miriam had taken in pretending — she had blown half a gale about it — that he had had no right to dispose of such a production without her consent. His answer to this was simply that the purchaser was so little of a stranger that it did n't go, so to speak, out of the family, out of hers. It did n't matter, Miriam's retort that if Mr. Sherringham had formerly been no stranger he was utterly one now, so that nothing would ever less delight him than to see her hated image on his wall. He would back out of the bargain and Nick be left with the picture on his hands. Nick jeered at this shallow theory and when she came to sit the question served as well as another to sprinkle their familiar silences with chaff. He already knew something, as we have seen, of the conditions in which his distracted kinsman had left England; and this connected itself, in casual meditation, with some of the calculations imputable to Julia and to Biddy. There had naturally been a sequel to the queer behaviour perceptible in Peter, at the theatre, on the eve of his departure — a sequel lighted by a word of Miriam's in the course of her first sitting to Nick after her great night. "Fancy" — so this observation ran — "fancy the dear man finding time in the press of all his last duties to ask me to marry him!"

"He told me you had found time in the press of all yours to say you would," Nick replied. And this was pretty much all that had passed on the subject between them — save of course her immediately

making clear that Peter had grossly misinformed him. What had happened was that she had said she would do nothing of the sort. She professed a desire not to be confronted again with this obnoxious theme, and Nick easily fell in with it — quite from his own settled inclination not to handle that kind of subject with her. If Julia had false ideas about him, and if Peter had them too, his part of the business was to take the simplest course to establish the falsity. There were difficulties indeed attached even to the simplest course, but there would be a difficulty the less if one should forbear to meddle in promiscuous talk with the general suggestive topic of intimate unions. It is certain that in these days Nick cultivated the practice of forbearances for which he did n't receive, for which perhaps he never would receive, due credit.

He had been convinced for some time that one of the next things he should hear would be that Julia Dallow had arranged to marry either Mr. Macgeorge or some other master of multitudes. He could think of that now, he found — think of it with resignation even when Julia, before his eyes, looked so handsomely forgetful that her appearance had to be taken as referring still more to their original intimacy than to his comparatively superficial offence. What made this accomplishment of his own remarkable was that there was something else he thought of quite as much — the fact that he had only to see her again to feel by how great a charm she had in the old days taken possession of him. This charm operated apparently in a very direct primitive way: her presence diffused

it and fully established it, but her absence left comparatively little of it behind. It dwelt in the very facts of her person — it was something she happened physically to be; yet — considering that the question was of something very like loveliness — its envelope of associations, of memories and recurrences, had no great density. She packed it up and took it away with her quite as if she had been a woman who had come to sell a set of laces. The laces were as wonderful as ever when taken out of the box, but to admire again their rarity you had to send for the woman. What was above all remarkable for our young man was that Miriam Rooth fetched a fellow, vulgarly speaking, very much less than Julia at the times when, being on the spot, Julia did fetch. He could paint Miriam day after day without any agitating blur of vision; in fact the more he saw of her the clearer grew the atmosphere through which she blazed, the more her richness became one with that of the flowering work. There are reciprocities and special sympathies in such a relation; mysterious affinities they used to be called, divinations of private congruity. Nick had an unexpressed conviction that if, according to his defeated desire, he had embarked with Mrs. Dallow in this particular quest of a great prize, disaster would have overtaken them on the deep waters. Even with the limited risk indeed disaster had come; but it was of a different kind and it had the advantage for him that now she could n't reproach and denounce him as the cause of it — could n't do so at least on any ground he was obliged to recognise. She would never know how much he had cared for

her, how much he cared for her still; inasmuch as the conclusive proof for himself was his conscious reluctance to care for another woman — evidence she positively misread. Some day he would doubtless try to do that; but such a day seemed as yet far off, and he had meanwhile no spite, no vindictive impulse, to help him. The soreness that mingled with his liberation, the sense of indignity even, as of a full cup suddenly dashed by a blundering hand from his lips, demanded certainly a balm; but it found the balm, for the time, in another passion, not in a rancorous exercise of the same — a passion strong enough to make him forget what a pity it was he was not so formed as to care for two women at once.

As soon as Julia returned to England he broke ground to his mother on the subject of her making the mistress of Broadwood understand that she and the girls now regarded their occupancy of that estate as absolutely over. He had already, several weeks before, picked a little at the arid tract of that indicated surrender, but in the interval the soil appeared to have formed again to a considerable thickness. It was disagreeable to him to call his parent's attention to the becoming course, and especially disagreeable to have to emphasise it and discuss it and perhaps clamour for it. He would have liked the whole business to be tacit — a little triumph of silent delicacy. But he found reasons to suspect that what in fact would be most tacit was Julia's certain endurance of any chance failure of that charm. Lady Agnes had a theory that they had virtually — "practically" as she said — given up the place, so that there was no

need of making a splash about it; but Nick discovered in the course of an exploration of Biddy's view more rigorous perhaps than any to which he had ever subjected her, that none of their property had been removed from the delightful house — none of the things (there were ever so many things) heavily planted there when their mother took possession. Lady Agnes was the proprietor of innumerable articles of furniture, relics and survivals of her former greatness, and moved about the world with a train of heterogeneous baggage; so that her quiet overflow into the spaciousness of Broadwood had had all the luxury of a final subsidence. What Nick had to propose to her now was a dreadful combination, a relapse into the conditions she most hated — seaside lodgings, bald storehouses in the Marylebone Road, little London rooms crammed with objects that caught the dirt and made them stuffy. He was afraid he should really finish her, and he himself was surprised in a degree at his insistence. He would n't have supposed he should have cared so much, but he found he did care intensely. He cared enough — it says everything — to explain to his mother that her retention of Broadwood would show "practically" (since that was her great word) for the violation of an agreement. Julia had given them the place on the understanding that he was to marry her, and once he was definitely not to marry her they had no right to keep the place. "Yes, you make the mess and *we* pay the penalty!" the poor lady flashed out; but this was the only overt protest she made — except indeed to contend that their withdrawal would be an act ungracious and

offensive to Julia. She looked as she had looked during the months that succeeded his father's death, but she gave a general, a final grim assent to the proposition that, let their kinswoman take it as she would, their own duty was unmistakeably clear.

It was Grace who was principal representative of the idea that Julia would be outraged by such a step; she never ceased to repeat that she had never heard of anything so "nasty." Nick would have expected this of Grace, but he felt rather bereft and betrayed when Biddy murmured to him that *she* knew — that there was really no need of their sacrificing their mother's comfort to an extravagant scruple. She intimated that if Nick would only consent to their going on with Broadwood as if nothing had happened — or rather as if everything had happened — she would answer for the feelings of the owner. For almost the first time in his life Nick disliked what Biddy said to him, and he gave her a sharp rejoinder, a taste of the general opinion that they all had enough to do to answer for themselves. He remembered afterwards the way she looked at him — startled, even frightened and with rising tears — before turning away. He held that they should judge better how Julia would take it after they had thrown up the place; and he made it his duty to arrange that his mother should formally advise her, by letter, of their intending to depart at once. Julia could then protest to her heart's content. Nick was aware that for the most part he did n't pass for practical; he could imagine why, from his early years, people should have joked him about it. But this time he was determined

to rest on a rigid view of things as they were. He did n't see his mother's letter, but he knew that it went. He felt she would have been more loyal if she had shown it to him, though of course there could be but little question of loyalty now. That it had really been written, however, very much on the lines he dictated was clear to him from the subsequent surprise which Lady Agnes's blankness did n't prevent his divining.

Julia acknowledged the offered news, but in unexpected terms: she had apparently neither resisted nor protested; she had simply been very glad to get her house back again and had not accused any of them of nastiness. Nick saw no more of her letter than he had seen of his mother's, but he was able to say to Grace — to their parent he was studiously mute — "My poor child, you see after all that we have n't kicked up such a row." Grace shook her head and looked gloomy and deeply wise, replying that he had no cause to triumph — they were so far from having seen the end of it yet. Thus he guessed that his mother had complied with his wish on the calculation that it would be a mere form, that Julia would entreat them not to be so fantastic and that he himself would then, in the presence of her wounded surprise, consent to a quiet continuance, so much in the interest — the air of Broadwood had a purity! — of the health of all of them. But since Julia jumped at their sacrifice he had no chance to be mollified: he had all grossly to persist in having been right.

At bottom probably he was a little surprised at Julia's so prompt assent. Literally speaking it was not perfectly graceful. He was sorry his mother had been

so deceived, but was sorrier still for Biddy's mistake — it showed she might be mistaken about other things. Nothing was left now but for Lady Agnes to say, as she did substantially whenever she saw him: "We're to prepare to spend the autumn at Worthing then or some other horrible place? I don't know their names: it's the only thing we can afford." There was an implication in this that if he expected her to drag her girls about to country-houses in a continuance of the fidgety effort to work them off he must understand at once that she was now too weary and too sad and too sick. She had done her best for them and it had all been vain and cruel — now therefore the poor creatures must look out for themselves. To the grossness of Biddy's misconduct she need n't refer, nor to the golden opportunity that young woman had forfeited by her odious treatment of Mr. Grindon. It was clear that this time Lady Agnes was incureably discouraged; so much so as to fail to glean the dimmest light from the fact that the girl was really making a long stay at Harsh. Biddy went to and fro two or three times and then in August fairly settled there; and what her mother mainly saw in her absence was the desire to keep out of the way of household reminders of her depravity. In fact, as turned out, Lady Agnes and Grace gathered themselves together in the first days of that month for another visit to the very old lady who had been Sir Nicholas's godmother; after which they went somewhere else — so that the question of Worthing had not immediately to be faced.

Nick stayed on in London with the obsession of

work humming in his ears; he was joyfully conscious that for three or four months, in the empty Babylon, he would have ample stores of time. But toward the end of August he got a letter from Grace in which she spoke of her situation and of her mother's in a manner that seemed to impose on him the doing of something tactful. They were paying a third visit — he knew that in Calcutta Gardens lady's-maids had been to and fro with boxes, replenishments of wardrobes — and yet somehow the outlook for the autumn was dark. Grace did n't say it in so many words, but what he read between the lines was that they had no more invitations. What therefore in pity's name was to become of them? People liked them well enough when Biddy was with them, but they did n't care for her mother and her, that prospect *tout pur*, and Biddy was cooped up indefinitely with Julia. This was not the manner in which Grace had anciently alluded to her sister's happy visits at Harsh, and the change of tone made Nick wince with a sense of all that had collapsed. Biddy was a little fish worth landing in short, scantly as she seemed disposed to bite, and Grace's rude probity could admit that she herself was not.

Nick had an inspiration: by way of doing something tactful he went down to Brighton and took lodgings, for several weeks, in the general interest, the very quietest and sunniest he could find. This he intended as a kindly surprise, a reminder of how he had his mother's and sisters' comfort at heart, how he could exert himself and save them trouble. But he had no sooner concluded his bargain — it

was a more costly one than he had at first calculated — than he was bewildered and befogged to learn that the persons on whose behalf he had so exerted himself were to pass the autumn at Broadwood with Julia. That daughter of privilege had taken the place into familiar use again and was now correcting their former surprise at her crude indifference — this was infinitely characteristic of Julia — by inviting them to share it with her. Nick wondered vaguely what she was "up to"; but when his mother treated herself to the fine irony of addressing him an elaborately humble request for his consent to their accepting the merciful refuge — she repeated this expression three times — he replied that she might do exactly as she liked: he would only mention that he should n't feel himself at liberty to come and see her there. This condition proved apparently to Lady Agnes's mind no hindrance, and she and her daughters were presently reinstated in the very apartments they had learned so to love. This time in fact it was even better than before — they had still fewer expenses. The expenses were Nick's: he had to pay a forfeit to the landlady at Brighton for backing out of his contract. He said nothing to his mother about that bungled business — he was literally afraid; but a sad event just then reminded him afresh how little it was the moment for squandering money. Mr. Carteret drew his last breath; quite painlessly it seemed, as the closing scene was described at Beauclere when the young man went down to the funeral. Two or three weeks later the contents of his will were made public in

the *Illustrated London News*, where it definitely appeared that he left a very large fortune, not a penny of which was to go to Nick. The provision for Mr. Chayter's declining years was remarkably handsome.

XLVIII

Miriam had mounted at a bound, in her new part, several steps in the ladder of fame, and at the climax of the London season this fact was brought home to her from hour to hour. It produced a thousand solicitations and entanglements, and she rapidly learned that to be celebrated takes up almost as much of one's own time as of other people's. Even though, as she boasted, she had reduced to a science the practice of "working" her mother — she made use of the good lady socially to the utmost, pushing her perpetually into the breach — there was many a juncture at which it was clear that she could n't too much disoblige without hurting her cause. She made almost an income out of the photographers — their appreciation of her as a subject knew no bounds — and she supplied the newspapers with columns of characteristic copy. To the gentlemen who sought speech of her on behalf of these organs she poured forth, vindictively, floods of unscrupulous romance; she told them all different tales, and, as her mother told them others more marvellous yet, publicity was cleverly caught by rival versions, which surpassed each other in authenticity. The whole case was remarkable, was unique; for if the girl was advertised by the bewilderment of her readers she seemed to every sceptic, on his going to see her, as fine as if he had discovered her for himself. She was still accommo-

dating enough, however, from time to time, to find an hour to come and sit to Nick Dormer, and he helped himself further by going to her theatre whenever he could. He was conscious Julia Dallow would probably hear of this and triumph with a fresh sense of how right she had been; but the reflexion only made him sigh resignedly, so true it struck him as being that there are some things explanation can never better, can never touch.

Miriam brought Basil Dashwood once to see her portrait, and Basil, who commended it in general, directed his criticism mainly to two points — its not yet being finished and its not having gone into that year's Academy. The young actor audibly panted; he felt the short breath of Miriam's rapidity, the quick beat of her success, and, looking at everything now from the standpoint of that speculation, could scarcely contain his impatience at the painter's clumsy slowness. He thought the latter's second attempt much better than his first, but somehow it ought by that time to be shining in the eye of the public. He put it to their friend with an air of acuteness — he had those felicities — that in every great crisis there is nothing like striking while the iron is hot. He even betrayed the conviction that by putting on a spurt Nick might wind up the job and still get the Academy people to take him in. Basil knew some of them; he all but offered to speak to them — the case was so exceptional; he had no doubt he could get something done. Against the appropriation of the work by Peter Sherringham he explicitly and loudly protested, in spite of the homeliest recommendations of silence from

Miriam; and it was indeed easy to guess how such an arrangement would interfere with his own conception of the eventual right place for the two portraits — the vestibule of the theatre, where every one going in and out would see them suspended face to face and surrounded by photographs, artistically disposed, of the young actress in a variety of characters. Dashwood showed superiority in his jump to the contention that so exhibited the pictures would really help to draw. Considering the virtue he attributed to Miriam the idea was exempt from narrow prejudice.

Moreover, though a trifle feverish, he was really genial; he repeated more than once "Yes, my dear sir, you've done it this time." This was a favourite formula with him; when some allusion was made to the girl's success he greeted it also with a comfortable "This time she *has* done it." There was ever a hint of fine judgement and far calculation in his tone. It appeared before he went that this time even he himself had done it — he had taken up something that would really answer. He told Nick more about Miriam, more certainly about her outlook at that moment, than she herself had communicated, contributing strongly to our young man's impression that one by one every gage of a great career was being dropped into her cup. Nick himself tasted of success vicariously for the hour. Miriam let her comrade talk only to contradict him, and contradicted him only to show how indifferently she could do it. She treated him as if she had nothing more to learn about his folly, but as if it had taken intimate friendship to reveal to her

the full extent of it. Nick did n't mind her intimate friendships, but he ended by disliking Dashwood, who gave on his nerves — a circumstance poor Julia, had it come to her knowledge, would doubtless have found deplorably significant. Miriam was more pleased with herself than ever: she now made no scruple of admitting that she enjoyed all her advantages. She had a fuller vision of how successful success could be; she took everything as it came — dined out every Sunday and even went into the country till the Monday morning; kept a hundred distinguished names on her lips and abounded in strange tales of the people who were making up to her. She struck Nick as less strenuous than she had been hitherto, as making even an aggressive show of inevitable laxities; but he was conscious of no obligation to rebuke her for it — the less as he had a dim vision that some effect of that sort, some irritation of his curiosity, was what she desired to produce. She would perhaps have liked, for reasons best known to herself, to look as if she were throwing herself away, not being able to do anything else. He could n't talk to her as if he took a deep interest in her career, because in fact he did n't; she remained to him primarily and essentially a pictorial object, with the nature of whose vicissitudes he was concerned — putting common charity and his personal good nature of course aside — only so far as they had something to say in her face. How could he know in advance what turn of her experience, twist of her life, would say most? — so possible was it even that complete failure or some incalculable perversion (innumerable were the queer traps that might be set

for her) would only make her for his particular purpose more precious.

When she had left him at any rate, the day she came with Basil Dashwood, and still more on a later occasion, that of his turning back to his work after putting her into her carriage, and otherwise bareheadedly manifesting, the last time, for that year apparently, that he was to see her — when she had left him it occurred to him in the light of her quick distinction that there were deep differences in the famous artistic life. Miriam was already in a glow of glory — which moreover was probably but a faint spark in relation to the blaze to come; and as he closed the door on her and took up his palette to rub it with a dirty cloth the little room in which his own battle was practically to be fought looked woefully cold and grey and mean. It was lonely and yet at the same time was peopled with unfriendly shadows — so thick he foresaw them gather in winter twilights to come — the duller conditions, the longer patiences, the less immediate and less personal joys. His late beginning was there and his wasted youth, the mistakes that would still bring forth children after their image, the sedentary solitude, the grey mediocrity, the poor explanations, the effect of foolishness he dreaded even from afar off in having to ask people to wait, and wait longer, and wait again, for a fruition which to their sense at least might well prove a grotesque anti-climax. He yearned enough over it, however it should figure, to feel that this possible pertinacity might enter into comparison even with such a productive force as Miriam's. That was after

all in his bare studio the most collective dim presence, the one that kept him company best as he sat there and that made it the right place however wrong — the sense that it was to the thing in itself he was attached. This was Miriam's case too, but the sharp contrast, which she showed him she also felt, was in the number of other things she got with the thing in itself.

I hasten to add that our young man had hours when this last mystic value struck him as requiring for its full operation no adjunct whatever — as being in its own splendour a summary of all adjuncts and apologies. I have related that the great collections, the National Gallery and the Museum were sometimes rather a series of dead surfaces to him; but the sketch I have attempted of him will have been inadequate if it fails to suggest that there were other days when, as he strolled through them, he plucked right and left perfect nosegays of reassurance. Bent as he was on working in the modern, which spoke to him with a thousand voices, he judged it better for long periods not to haunt the earlier masters, whose conditions had been so different — later he came to see that it did n't matter much, especially if one kept away; but he was liable to accidental deflexions from this theory, liable in particular to feel the sanctity of the great portraits of the past. These were the things the most inspiring, in the sense that while generations, while worlds had come and gone, they seemed far most to prevail and survive and testify. As he stood before them the perfection of their survival often struck him as the supreme

eloquence, the virtue that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away, but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different worlds, knowing so many secrets the particular world did n't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung.

Miriam notified her artist that her theatre was to close on the tenth of August, immediately after which she was to start, with the company, on a tremendous tour of the provinces. They were to make a lot of money, but they were to have no holiday, and she did n't want one; she only wanted to keep at it and make the most of her limited opportunities for practice; inasmuch as at that rate, playing but two parts a year — and such parts: she despised them! — she should n't have mastered the rudiments of her trade before decrepitude would compel her to lay it by. The first time she came to the studio after her visit with Dashwood she sprang up abruptly at the end of half an hour, saying she could sit no more — she had had enough and to spare of it. She was visibly restless and preoccupied, and though Nick had not waited till now to note that she had more moods in her list than he had tints on his palette he had never yet seen her sensibility at this particular pitch. It struck him rather as a waste of passion, but

he was ready to let her go. She looked round the place as if suddenly tired of it and then said mechanically, in a heartless London way, while she smoothed down her gloves, "So you're just going to stay on?" After he had confessed that this was his dark purpose she continued in the same casual talk-making manner: "I dare say it's the best thing for you. You're just going to grind, eh?"

"I see before me an eternity of grinding."

"All alone by yourself in this dull little hole? You *will* be conscientious, you *will* be virtuous."

"Oh my solitude will be mitigated — I shall have models and people."

"What people — what models?" Miriam asked as she arranged her hat before the glass.

"Well, no one so good as you."

"That's a prospect!" the girl laughed — "for all the good you've got out of me!"

"You're no judge of that quantity," said Nick, "and even I can't measure it just yet. Have I been rather a bore and a brute? I can easily believe it; I have n't talked to you — I have n't amused you as I might. The truth is that taking people's likenesses is a very absorbing inhuman occupation. You can't do much to them besides."

"Yes, it's a cruel honour to pay them."

"Cruel — that's too much," he objected.

"I mean it's one you should n't confer on those you like, for when it's over it's over: it kills your interest in them. After you've finished them you don't like them any more at all."

"Surely I like *you*," Nick returned, sitting tilted

back before his picture with his hands in his pockets.

"We've done very well: it's something not to have quarrelled" — and she smiled at him now, seeming more "in" it. "I would n't have had you slight your work — I would n't have had you do it badly. But there's no fear of that for you," she went on. "You're the real thing and the rare bird. I have n't lived with you this way without seeing that: you're the sincere artist so much more than I. No, no, don't protest," she added with one of her sudden fine transitions to a deeper tone. "You'll do things that will hand on your name when my screeching is happily over. Only you do seem to me, I confess, rather high and dry here — I speak from the point of view of your comfort and of my personal interest in you. You strike me as kind of lonely, as the Americans say — rather cut off and isolated in your grandeur. Have n't you any confrères — fellow artists and people of that sort? Don't they come near you?"

"I don't know them much," Nick humbly confessed. "I've always been afraid of them, and how can they take me seriously?"

"Well, *I*'ve got confrères, and sometimes I wish I had n't! But does your sister never come near you any more," she asked, "or is it only the fear of meeting me?"

He was aware of his mother's theory that Biddy was constantly bundled home from Rosedale Road at the approach of improper persons: she was as angry at this as if she would n't have been more so had her child suffered exposure; but the explanation

he gave his present visitor was nearer the truth. He reminded her that he had already told her — he had been careful to do this, so as not to let it appear she was avoided — that his sister was now most of the time in the country, staying with an hospitable relation.

"Oh yes," the girl rejoined to this, "with Mr. Sherringham's sister, Mrs. — what's her name? I always forget." And when he had pronounced the word with a reluctance he doubtless failed sufficiently to conceal — he hated to talk of Julia by any name and did n't know what business Miriam had with her — she went on: "That's the one — the beauty, the wonderful beauty. I shall never forget how handsome she looked the day she found me here. I don't in the least resemble her, but I should like to have a try at that type some day in a comedy of manners. But who the devil will write me a comedy of manners? There it is! The danger would be, no doubt, that I should push her *à la charge*."

Nick listened to these remarks in silence, saying to himself that if she should have the bad taste — which she seemed trembling on the brink of — to make an allusion to what had passed between the lady in question and himself he should dislike her beyond remedy. It would show him she was a coarse creature after all. Her good genius interposed, however, as against this hard penalty, and she quickly, for the moment at least, whisked away from the topic, demanding, since they spoke of comrades and visitors, what had become of Gabriel Nash, whom she had n't heard of for so many days.

"I think he's tired of me," said Nick; "he has n't been near me either. But after all it's natural — he has seen me through."

"Seen you through? Do you mean," she laughed, "seen through you? Why you've only just begun."

"Precisely, and at bottom he does n't like to see me begin. He's afraid I shall do something."

She wondered — as with the interest of that. "Do you mean he's jealous?"

"Not in the least, for from the moment one does anything one ceases to compete with him. It leaves him the field more clear. But that's just the discomfort for him — he feels, as you said just now, kind of lonely: he feels rather abandoned and even, I think, a little betrayed. So far from being jealous he yearns for me and regrets me. The only thing he really takes seriously is to speculate and understand, to talk about the reasons and the essence of things: the people who do that are the highest. The applications, the consequences, the vulgar little effects, belong to a lower plane, for which one must doubtless be tolerant and indulgent, but which is after all an affair of comparative accidents and trifles. Indeed he'll probably tell me frankly the next time I see him that he can't but feel that to come down to small questions of action — to the small prudences and compromises and simplifications of practice — is for the superior person really a fatal descent. One may be inoffensive and even commendable after it, but one can scarcely pretend to be interesting. '*Il en faut comme ça*,' but one does n't haunt them. He'll do his best for me; he'll come back again, but he'll

come back sad, and finally he'll fade away altogether. He'll go off to Granada or somewhere."

"The simplifications of practice?" cried Miriam. "Why they're just precisely the most blessed things on earth. What should we do without them?"

"What indeed?" Nick echoed. "But if we need them it's because we're not superior persons. We're awful Philistines."

"I'll be one with *you*," the girl smiled. "Poor Nash is n't worth talking about. What was it but a small question of action when he preached to you, as I know he did, to give up your seat?"

"Yes, he has a weakness for giving up — he'll go with you as far as that. But I'm not giving up any more, you see. I'm pegging away, and that's gross."

"He's an idiot — *n'en parlons plus!*" she dropped, gathering up her parasol but lingering.

"Ah I stick to him," Nick said. "He helped me at a difficult time."

"You ought to be ashamed to confess it."

"Oh you *are* a Philistine!" Nick returned.

"Certainly I am," she declared, going toward the door — "if it makes me one to be sorry, awfully sorry and even rather angry, that I have n't before me a period of the same sort of unsociable pegging away that you have. For want of it I shall never really be good. However, if you don't tell people I've said so they'll never know. Your conditions are far better than mine and far more respectable: you can do as many things as you like in patient obscurity while I'm pitchforked into the *mêlée* and into the

most improbable fame — all on the back of a solitary *cheval de bataille*, a poor broken-winded screw. I read it clear that I shall be condemned for the greater part of the rest of my days — do you see that? — to play the stuff I'm acting now. I'm studying Juliet and I want awfully to do her, but really I'm mortally afraid lest, making a success of her, I should find myself in such a box. Perhaps the brutes would want Juliet for ever instead of my present part. You see amid what delightful alternatives one moves. What I long for most I never shall have had — five quiet years of hard all-round work in a perfect company, with a manager more perfect still, playing five hundred things and never being heard of at all. I may be too particular, but that's what I should have liked. I think I'm disgusting with my successful crudities. It's discouraging; it makes one not care much what happens. What's the use, in such an age, of being good?"

"Good? Your haughty claim," Nick laughed, "is that you're bad."

"I mean *good*, you know — there are other ways. Don't be stupid." And Miriam tapped him — he was near her at the door — with her parasol.

"I scarcely know what to say to you," he logically pleaded, "for certainly it's your fault if you get on so fast."

"I'm too clever — I'm a humbug."

"That's the way I used to be," said Nick.

She rested her brave eyes on him, then turned them over the room slowly; after which she attached them again, kindly, musingly — rather as if he had

been a fine view or an interesting object — to his face. "Ah the pride of that — the sense of purification! He 'used' to be forsooth! Poor me! Of course you'll say 'Look at the sort of thing I've undertaken to produce compared with the rot you have.' So it's all right. Become great in the proper way and don't expose me." She glanced back once more at the studio as if to leave it for ever, and gave another last look at the unfinished canvas on the easel. She shook her head sadly. "Poor Mr. Sherringham — with *that!*" she wailed.

"Oh I'll finish it — it will be very decent," Nick said.

"Finish it by yourself?"

"Not necessarily. You'll come back and sit when you return to London."

"Never, never, never again."

He wondered. "Why you've made me the most profuse offers and promises."

"Yes, but they were made in ignorance and I've backed out of them. I'm capricious too — *faites la part de ça.* I see it would n't do — I did n't know it then. We're too far apart — I *am*, as you say, a Philistine." And as he protested with vehemence against this unscrupulous bad faith she added: "You'll find other models. Paint Gabriel Nash."

"Gabriel Nash — as a substitute for you?"

"It will be a good way to get rid of him. Paint Mrs. Dallow too," Miriam went on as she passed out of the door he had opened for her — "paint Mrs. Dallow if you wish to eradicate the last possibility of a throb."

It was strange that, since only a moment before he had been in a state of mind to which the superfluity of this reference would have been the clearest thing about it, he should now have been moved to receive it quickly, naturally, irreflectively, receive it with the question: "The last possibility? Do you mean in her or in me?"

"Oh in you. I don't know anything about 'her.'"

"But that would n't be the effect," he argued with the same supervening candour. "I believe that if she were to sit to me the usual law would be reversed."

"The usual law?"

"Which you cited a while since and of which I recognised the general truth. In the case you speak of," he said, "I should probably make a shocking picture."

"And fall in love with her again? Then for God's sake risk the daub!" Miriam laughed out as she floated away to her victoria.

XLIX

She had guessed happily in saying to him that to offer to paint Gabriel Nash would be the way to get rid of that visitant. It was with no such invidious purpose indeed that our young man proposed to his intermittent friend to sit; rather, as August was dusty in the London streets, he had too little hope that Nash would remain in town at such a time to oblige him. Nick had no wish to get rid of his private philosopher; he liked his philosophy, and though of course premeditated paradox was the light to read him by he yet had frequently and incidentally an inspired unexpectedness. He remained in Rosedale Road the man who most produced by his presence the effect of company. All the other men of Nick's acquaintance, all his political friends, represented, often very communicatively, their own affairs, their own affairs alone; which when they did it well was the most their host could ask of them. But Nash had the rare distinction that he seemed somehow to figure *his* affairs, the said host's, and to show an interest in them unaffected by the ordinary social limitations of capacity. This relegated him to the class of high luxuries, and Nick was well aware that we hold our luxuries by a fitful and precarious tenure. If a friend without personal eagerness was one of the greatest of these it would be evident to the simplest mind that by the law of distribution of earthly

boons such a convenience should be expected to forfeit in duration what it displayed in intensity. He had never been without a suspicion that Nash was too good to last, though for that matter nothing had yet confirmed a vague apprehension that his particular manner of breaking up or breaking down would be by his wishing to put so fresh a recruit in relation with other disciples.

That would practically amount to a catastrophe, Nick felt; for it was odd that one could both have a great kindness for him and not in the least, when it came to the point, yearn for a view of his personal extensions. His originality had always been that he appeared to have none; and if in the first instance he had introduced his bright young political prodigy to Miriam and her mother, that was an exception for which Peter Sherringham's interference had been mainly responsible. All the same, however, it was some time before Nick ceased to view it as perhaps on the awkward books that, to complete his education as it were, Gabriel would wish him to converse a little with spirits formed by a like tonic discipline. Nick had an instinct, in which there was no consciousness of detriment to Nash, that the pupils, possibly even the imitators, of such a genius would be, as he mentally phrased it, something awful. He could be sure, even Gabriel himself could be sure, of his own reservations, but how could either of them be sure of those of others? Imitation is a fortunate homage only in proportion as it rests on measurements, and there was an indefinable something in Nash's doctrine that would have been discredited by exaggera-

tion or by zeal. Providence happily appeared to have spared it this ordeal; so that Nick had after months still to remind himself how his friend had never pressed on his attention the least little group of fellow mystics, never offered to produce them for his edification. It scarcely mattered now that he was just the man to whom the superficial would attribute that sort of tail: it would probably have been hard for example to persuade Lady Agnes or Julia Dallow or Peter Sherringham that he was not most at home in some dusky, untidy, dimly-imagined suburb of "culture," a region peopled by unpleasant phrase-mongers who thought him a gentleman and who had no human use but to be held up in the comic press —which was moreover probably restrained by decorum from touching upon the worst of their aberrations.

Nick at any rate never ran his academy to earth nor so much as skirted the suburb in question; never caught from the impenetrable background of his life the least reverberation of flitting or of flirting, the faintest æsthetic ululation. There had been moments when he was even moved to anxiety by the silence that poor Gabriel's own faculty of sound made all about him — when at least it reduced to plainer elements (the mere bald terms of lonely singleness and thrift, of the lean philosophic life) the mystery he could never wholly dissociate from him, the air as of the transient and occasional, the likeness to curling vapour or murmuring wind or shifting light. It was for instance a symbol of this unclassified state, the lack of all position as a name

in cited lists, that Nick in point of fact had no idea where he lived, would not have known how to go and see him or send him a doctor if he had heard he was ill. He had never walked with him to any door of Gabriel's own, even to pause at the threshold, though indeed Nash had a club, the Anonymous, in some improbable square, of which he might be suspected of being the only member — one had never heard of another — where it was vaguely understood letters would some day or other find him. Fortunately he pressed with no sharpness the spring of pity — his whole "form" was so easy a grasp of the helm of consciousness, which he would never let go. He would never consent to any deformity, but would steer his course straight through the eventual narrow pass and simply go down over the horizon.

He in any case turned up Rosedale Road one day after Miriam had left London; he had just come back from a fortnight in Brittany, where he had drawn refreshment from the tragic sweetness of — well, of everything. He was on his way somewhere else — was going abroad for the autumn but was not particular what he did, professing that he had come back just to get Nick utterly off his mind. "It's very nice, it's very nice; yes, yes, I see," he remarked, giving a little general assenting sigh as his eyes wandered over the simple scene — a sigh which for a suspicious ear would have testified to an insidious reaction.

Nick's ear, as we know, was already suspicious; a fact accounting for the expectant smile — it indi-

cated the pleasant apprehension of a theory confirmed — with which he returned: "Do you mean my pictures are nice?"

"Yes, yes, your pictures and the whole thing."

"The whole thing?"

"Your existence in this little remote independent corner of the great city. The disinterestedness of your attitude, the persistence of your effort, the piety, the beauty, in short the edification, of the whole spectacle."

Nick laughed a little ruefully. "How near to having had enough of me you must be when you speak of me as edifying!" Nash changed colour slightly at this; it was the first time in his friend's remembrance that he had given a sign of embarrassment. "*Vous allez me lâcher*, I see it coming; and who can blame you? — for I've ceased to be in the least spectacular. I had my little hour; it was a great deal, for some people don't even have that. I've given you your curious case and I've been generous; I made the drama last for you as long as I could. You'll 'slope,' my dear fellow, — you'll quietly slope; and it will be all right and inevitable, though I shall miss you greatly at first. Who knows whether without you I should n't still have been 'representing' Harsh, heaven help me? You rescued me; you converted me from a representative into an example — that's a shade better. But don't I know where you must be when you're reduced to praising my piety?"

"Don't turn me away," said Nash plaintively; "give me a cigarette."

"I shall never dream of turning you away; I shall cherish you till the latest possible hour. I'm only trying to keep myself in tune with the logic of things. The proof of how I cling is that precisely I want you to sit to me."

"To sit to you?" With which Nick could fancy his visitor a little blank.

"Certainly, for after all it is n't much to ask. Here we are and the hour's peculiarly propitious — long light days with no one coming near me, so that I've plenty of time. I had a hope I should have some orders: my younger sister, whom you know and who's a great optimist, plied me with that vision. In fact we invented together a charming little sordid theory that there might be rather a 'run' on me from the chatter (such as it was) produced by my taking up this line. My sister struck out the idea that a good many of the pretty ladies would think me interesting and would want to be done. Perhaps they do, but they've controlled themselves, for I can't say the run has commenced. They have n't even come to look, but I dare say they don't yet quite take it in. Of course it's a bad time — with every one out of town; though you know they might send for me to come and do them at home. Perhaps they will when they settle down. A portrait-tour of a dozen country-houses for the autumn and winter — what do you say to that for the ardent life? I know I excruciate you," Nick added, "but don't you see how it's in my interest to try how much you'll still stand?"

Gabriel puffed his cigarette with a serenity so

perfect that it might have been assumed to falsify these words. "Mrs. Dallow will send for you — *vous allez voir ça*," he said in a moment, brushing aside all vagueness.

"She'll send for me?"

"To paint her portrait; she'll recapture you on that basis. She'll get you down to one of the country-houses, and it will all go off as charmingly — with sketching in the morning, on days you can't hunt, and anything you like in the afternoon, and fifteen courses in the evening; there'll be bishops and ambassadors staying — as if you were a 'well-known' awfully clever amateur. Take care, take care, for, fickle as you may think me, I can read the future: don't imagine you've come to the end of me yet. Mrs. Dallow and your sister, of both of whom I speak with the greatest respect, are capable of hatching together the most conscientious delightful plan for you. Your differences with the beautiful lady will be patched up and you'll each come round a little and meet the other halfway. The beautiful lady will swallow your profession if you'll swallow hers. She'll put up with the palette if you'll put up with the country-house. It will be a very unusual one in which you won't find a good north room where you can paint. You'll go about with her and do all her friends, all the bishops and ambassadors, and you'll eat your cake and have it, and every one, beginning with your wife, will forget there's anything queer about you, and everything will be for the best in the best of worlds; so that, together — you and she — you'll become a great social institution and every

one will think she has a delightful husband; to say nothing of course of your having a delightful wife. Ah my dear fellow, you turn pale, and with reason!" Nash went lucidly on: "that's to pay you for having tried to make me let you have it. You have it then there! I may be a bore" — the emphasis of this, though a mere shade, testified to the first personal resentment Nick had ever heard his visitor express — "I may be a bore, but once in a while I strike a light, I make things out. Then I venture to repeat 'Take care, take care.' If, as I say, I respect *ces dames* infinitely it's because they will be acting according to the highest wisdom of their sex. That's the sort of thing women do for a man — the sort of thing they invent when they're exceptionally good and clever. When they're not they don't do so well; but it's not for want of trying. There's only one thing in the world better than their incomparable charm: it's their abysmal conscience. Deep calleth unto deep — the one's indeed a part of the other. And when they club together, when they earnestly consider, as in the case we're supposing," Nash continued, "then the whole thing takes a lift; for it's no longer the virtue of the individual, it's that of the wondrous sex."

"You're so remarkable that, more than ever, I must paint you," Nick returned, "though I'm so agitated by your prophetic words that my hand trembles and I shall doubtless scarcely be able to hold my brush. Look how I rattle my easel trying to put it into position. I see it all there just as you show it. Yes, it will be a droll day, and more modern than anything yet, when the conscience of women

makes out good reasons for men's not being in love with them. You talk of their goodness and cleverness, and it's certainly much to the point. I don't know what else they themselves might do with those graces, but I don't see what man can do with them but be fond of them where he finds them.

"Oh you'll do it — you'll do it!" cried Nash, brightly jubilant.

"What is it I shall do?"

"Exactly what I just said; if not next year then the year after, or the year after that. You'll go half-way to meet her and she'll drag you about and pass you off. You'll paint the bishops and become a social institution. That is you'll do it if you don't take great care."

"I shall, no doubt, and that's why I cling to you. You must still look after me," Nick went on. "Don't melt away into a mere improbable reminiscence, a delightful symbolic fable — don't if you can possibly help it. The trouble is, you see, that you can't really keep hold very tight, because at bottom it will amuse you much more to see me in another pickle than to find me simply jogging down the vista of the years on the straight course. Let me at any rate have some sort of sketch of you as a kind of feather from the angel's wing or a photograph of the ghost — to prove to me in the future that you were once a solid sociable fact, that I did n't invent you, did n't launch you as a deadly hoax. Of course I shall be able to say to myself that you can't have been a fable — otherwise you'd have a moral; but that won't be enough, because I'm not sure you won't have had one. Some

day you'll peep in here languidly and find me in such an attitude of piety — presenting my bent back to you as I niggle over some interminable botch — that I shall give cruelly on your nerves and you'll just draw away, closing the door softly. You'll be gentle and considerate about it and spare me, you won't even make me look round. You'll steal off on tiptoe never never to return."

Gabriel consented to sit; he professed he should enjoy it and be glad to give up for it his immediate foreign commerce, so vague to Nick, so definite apparently to himself; and he came back three times for the purpose. Nick promised himself a deal of interest from this experiment, for with the first hour of it he began to feel that really as yet, given the conditions under which he now studied him, he had never at all thoroughly explored his friend. His impression had been that Nash had a head quite fine enough to be a challenge, and that as he sat there day by day all sorts of pleasant and paintable things would come out in his face. This impression was not gainsaid, but the whole tangle grew denser. It struck our young man that he had never *seen* his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of actually seeing it. What was revealed was the difficulty — what he saw was not the measureable mask but the ambiguous meaning. He had taken things for granted which literally were not there, and he found things there — except that he could n't catch them — which he had not hitherto counted in or presumed to handle. This baffling effect, eminently in the line of the mystifying, so

familiar to Nash, might have been the result of his whimsical volition, had it not appeared to our artist, after a few hours of the job, that his sitter was not the one who enjoyed it most. He was uncomfortable, at first vaguely and then definitely so — silent, restless, gloomy, dim, as if on the test the homage of a directer attention than he had ever had gave him less pleasure than he would have supposed. He had been willing to judge of this in good faith; but frankly he rather suffered. He was n't cross, but was clearly unhappy, and Nick had never before felt him contract instead of expanding.

It was all accordingly as if a trap had been laid for him, and our young man asked himself if it were really fair. At the same time there was something richly rare in such a relation between the subject and the artist, and Nick was disposed to go on till he should have to stop for pity or for shame. He caught eventually a glimmer of the truth underlying the strangeness, guessed that what upset his friend was simply the reversal, in such a combination, of his usual terms of intercourse. He was so accustomed to living upon irony and the interpretation of things that it was new to him to be himself interpreted and — as a gentleman who sits for his portrait is always liable to be — interpreted all ironically. From being outside of the universe he was suddenly brought into it, and from the position of a free commentator and critic, an easy amateurish editor of the whole affair, reduced to that of humble ingredient and contributor. It occurred afterwards to Nick that he had perhaps brought on a catastrophe by having hap-

pened to throw off as they gossiped or languished, and not alone without a cruel intention, but with an impulse of genuine solicitude: "But, my dear fellow, what will you do when you're old?"

"Old? What do you call old?" Nash had replied bravely enough, but with another perceptible tinge of irritation. "Must I really remind you at this time of day that that term has no application to such a condition as mine? It only belongs to you wretched people who have the incureable superstition of 'doing'; it's the ignoble collapse you prepare for yourselves when you cease to be able to do. For me there'll be no collapse, no transition, no clumsy readjustment of attitude; for I shall only *be*, more and more, with all the accumulations of experience, the longer I live."

"Oh I'm not particular about the term," said Nick. "If you don't call it old, the ultimate state, call it weary — call it final. The accumulations of experience are practically accumulations of fatigue."

"I don't know anything about weariness. I live freshly — it does n't fatigue me."

"Then you need never die," Nick declared.

"Certainly; I dare say I'm indestructible, immortal."

Nick laughed out at this — it would be such fine news to some people. But it was uttered with perfect gravity, and it might very well have been in the spirit of that gravity that Nash failed to observe his agreement to sit again the next day. The next and the next and the next passed, but he never came back.

True enough, punctuality was not important for a man who felt that he had the command of all time. Nevertheless his disappearance "without a trace," that of a personage in a fairy-tale or a melodrama, made a considerable impression on his friend as the months went on; so that, though he had never before had the least difficulty about entering into the play of Gabriel's humour, Nick now recalled with a certain fanciful awe the special accent with which he had ranked himself among imperishable things. He wondered a little if he had n't at last, balancing always on the stretched tight-rope of his wit, fallen over on the wrong side. He had never before, of a truth, been so nearly witless, and would have to have gone mad in short to become so singularly simple. Perhaps indeed he was acting only more than usual in his customary spirit — thoughtfully contributing, for Nick's enlivenment, a purple rim of mystery to an horizon now so dreadfully let down. The mystery at any rate remained; another shade of purple in fact was virtually added to it. Nick had the prospect, for the future, of waiting to see, all curiously, when Nash would turn up, if ever, and the further diversion — it almost consoled him for the annoyance of being left with a second unfinished thing on his hands — of imagining in the portrait he had begun an odd tendency to fade gradually from the canvas. He could n't catch it in the act, but he could have ever a suspicion on glancing at it that the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little — for all the world as in some delicate Hawthorne tale — and making the surface indistinct and bare of all re-

semblance to the model. Of course the moral of the Hawthorne tale would be that his personage would come back in quaint confidence on the day his last projected shadow should have vanished.

L

One day toward the end of March of the following year, in other words more than six months after Mr. Nash's disappearance, Bridget Dormer came into her brother's studio and greeted him with the effusion that accompanies a return from an absence. She had been staying at Broadwood — she had been staying at Harsh. She had various things to tell him about these episodes, about his mother, about Grace, about her small subterraneous self, and about Percy's having come, just before, over to Broadwood for two days; the longest visit with which, almost since they could remember, the head of the family had honoured their common parent. Nick noted indeed that this demonstration had apparently been taken as a great favour, and Biddy loyally testified to the fact that her elder brother was awfully jolly and that his presence had been a pretext for tremendous fun. Nick accordingly asked her what had passed about his marriage — what their mother had said to him.

"Oh nothing," she replied; and Percy had said nothing to Lady Agnes and not a word to herself. This partly explained, for his junior, the consequent beatitude — none but cheerful topics had been produced; but he questioned the girl further — to a point which led her to say: "Oh I dare say that before long she'll write to her."

"Who'll write to whom?"

"Mamma'll write to Percy's wife. I'm sure he'd like it. Of course we shall end by going to see her. He was awfully disappointed at what he found in Spain — he did n't find anything."

Biddy spoke of his disappointment almost with commiseration, for she was evidently inclined this morning to a fresh and kindly view of things. Nick could share her feeling but so far as was permitted by a recognition merely general of what his brother must have looked for. It might have been snipe and it might have been bristling boars. Biddy was indeed brief at first about everything, in spite of all the weeks that had gone since their last meeting; for he quickly enough saw she had something behind — something that made her gay and that she wanted to come to quickly. He was vaguely vexed at her being, fresh from Broadwood, so gay as that; for — it was impossible to shut one's eyes to the fact — what had practically come to pass in regard to that rural retreat was exactly what he had desired to avert. All winter, while it had been taken for granted his mother and sisters were doing what he wished, they had been doing precisely what he hated. He held Biddy perhaps least responsible, and there was no one he could exclusively blame. He washed his hands of the matter and succeeded fairly well, for the most part, in forgetting he was not pleased. Julia herself in truth appeared to have been the most active member of the little group united to make light of his decencies. There had been a formal restitution of Broadwood, but the three ladies were there more than ever, with the slight difference that

they were mainly there with its mistress. Mahomet had declined to go any more to the mountain, so the mountain had virtually come to Mahomet.

After their long visit in the autumn Lady Agnes and her girls had come back to town; but they had gone down again for Christmas and Julia had taken this occasion to write to Nick that she hoped very much he would n't refuse them all his own company for just a little scrap of the supremely sociable time. Nick, after reflexion, judged it best not to refuse, so that he passed, in the event, four days under his cousin's roof. The "all" proved a great many people, for she had taken care to fill the house. She took the largest view of hospitality and Nick had never seen her so splendid, so free-handed, so gracefully active. She was a perfect mistress of the revels; she had arranged some ancient bravery for every day and for every night. The Dormers were so much in it, as the phrase was, that after all their discomfiture their fortune seemed in an hour to have come back. There had been a moment when, in extemporised charades, Lady Agnes, an elderly figure being required, appeared on the point of undertaking the part of the housekeeper at a castle, who, dropping her *h*'s, showed sheeplike tourists about; but she waived the opportunity in favour of her daughter Grace. Even Grace had a great success; Grace dropped her *h*'s as with the crash of empires. Nick of course was in the charades and in everything, but Julia was not; she only invented, directed, led the applause. When nothing else was forward Nick "sketched" the whole company: they followed him

about, they waylaid him on staircases, clamouring to be allowed to sit. He obliged them so far as he could, all save Julia, who did n't clamour; and, growing rather red, he thought of Gabriel Nash while he bent over the paper. Early in the new year he went abroad for six weeks, but only as far as Paris. It was a new Paris for him then: a Paris of the Rue Bonaparte and three or four professional friends — he had more of these there than in London; a Paris of studios and studies and models, of researches and revelations, comparisons and contrasts, of strong impressions and long discussions and rather uncomfortable economies, small cafés, bad fires and the general sense of being twenty again.

While he was away his mother and sisters — Lady Agnes now sometimes wrote to him — returned to London for a month, and before he was again established in Rosedale Road they went back for a third course of Broadwood. After they had been there five days — and this was the salt of the whole feast — Julia took herself off to Harsh, leaving them in undisturbed possession. They had remained so — they would n't come up to town till after Easter. The trick was played, and Biddy, as I have mentioned, was now very content. Her brother presently learned, however, that the reason of this was not wholly the success of the trick; unless indeed her further ground were only a continuation of it. She was not in London as a forerunner of her mother; she was not even as yet in Calcutta Gardens. She had come to spend a week with Florry Tressilian, who had lately taken the dearest little flat in a charming new place, just

put up, on the other side of the Park, with all kinds of lifts and tubes and electricities. Florry had been awfully nice to her — had been with them ever so long at Broadwood while the flat was being painted and prepared — and mamma had then let her, let Biddy, promise to come to her, when everything was ready, so that they might have a happy old maids' (for they *were* old maids now!) house-warming together. If Florry could by this time do without a chaperon — she had two latchkeys and went alone on the top of omnibuses, and her name was in the Red Book — she was enough of a duenna for another girl. Biddy referred with sweet cynical eyes to the fine happy stride she had thus taken in the direction of enlightened spinsterhood; and Nick hung his head, immensely abashed and humiliated, for, modern as he had fatuously supposed himself, there were evidently currents more modern yet.

It so happened that on this particular morning he had drawn out of a corner his interrupted study of Gabriel Nash; on no further curiosity — he had only been looking round the room in a rummaging spirit — than to see how much or how little of it remained. It had become to his view so dim an adumbration — he was sure of this, and it pressed some spring of melancholy mirth — that it did n't seem worth putting away, and he left it leaning against a table as if it had been a blank canvas or a "preparation" to be painted over. In this posture it attracted Biddy's attention, for on a second glance it showed distinguishable features. She had not seen it before and now asked whom it might represent, remarking

also that she could almost guess, yet not quite: she had known the original but could n't name him.

"Six months ago, for a few days, it represented Gabriel Nash," Nick replied. "But it is n't anybody or anything now."

"Six months ago? What's the matter with it and why don't you go on?"

"What's the matter with it is more than I can tell you. But I can't go on because I've lost my model."

She had an almost hopeful stare. "Is he beautifully dead?"

Her brother laughed out at the candid cheerfulness, hopefulness almost, with which this enquiry broke from her. "He's only dead to me. He has gone away."

"Where has he gone?"

"I have n't the least idea."

"Why, have you quarrelled?"—Biddy shone again.

"Quarrelled? For what do you take us? Does the nightingale quarrel with the moon?"

"I need n't ask which of you is the moon," she said.

"Of course I'm the nightingale. But, more literally," Nick continued, "Nash has melted back into the elements — he's part of the great air of the world." And then as even with this lucidity he saw the girl still mystified: "I've a notion he has gone to India and at the present moment is reclining on a bank of flowers in the vale of Cashmere."

Biddy had a pause after which she dropped: "Julia will be glad — she dislikes him so."

"If she dislikes him why should she be glad he's so enviably placed?"

"I mean about his going away. She'll be glad of that."

"My poor incorrigible child," Nick cried, "what has Julia to do with it?"

"She has more to do with things than you think," Biddy returned with all her bravery. Yet she had no sooner uttered the words than she perceptibly blushed. Hereupon, to attenuate the foolishness of her blush — only it had the opposite effect — she added: "She thinks he has been a bad element in your life."

Nick emitted a long strange sound. "She thinks perhaps, but she does n't think enough; otherwise she'd arrive at this better thought — that she knows nothing whatever about my life."

"Ah brother," the girl pleaded with solemn eyes, "you don't imagine what an interest she takes in it. She has told me many times — she has talked lots to me about it." Biddy paused and then went on, an anxious little smile shining through her gravity as if from a cautious wonder as to how much he would take: "She has a conviction it was Mr. Nash who made trouble between you."

"Best of little sisters," Nick pronounced, "those are thoroughly second-rate ideas, the result of a perfectly superficial view. Excuse my possibly priggish tone, but they really attribute to my dear detached friend a part he's quite incapable of playing. He can neither make trouble nor take trouble; no trouble could ever either have come out of him or have got into him. Moreover," our young man continued, "if Julia has talked to you so much about the matter there's no harm in my talking to you a little. When

she threw me over in an hour it was on a perfectly definite occasion. That occasion was the presence in my studio of a dishevelled, an abandoned actress."

"Oh Nick, she has not thrown you over!" Biddy protested. "She has not — I've proof."

He felt at this direct denial a certain stir of indignation and looked at the girl with momentary sternness. "Has she sent you here to tell me this? What do you mean by proof?"

Biddy's eyes, at these questions, met her brother's with a strange expression, and for a few seconds, while she looked entreatingly into them, she wavered there with parted lips and vaguely stretched out her hands. The next minute she had burst into tears — she was sobbing on his breast. He said "Hallo!" and soothed her; but it was very quickly over. Then she told him what she meant by her proof and what she had had on her mind ever since her present arrival. It was a message from Julia, but not to say — not to say what he had questioned her about just before; though indeed, more familiar now that he had his arm round her, she boldly expressed the hope it might in the end come to the same thing. Julia simply wanted to know — she had instructed her to sound him discreetly — if Nick would undertake her portrait; and she wound up this experiment in "sounding" by the statement that their beautiful kinswoman was dying to sit.

"Dying to sit?" echoed Nick, whose turn it was this time to feel his colour rise.

"At any moment you like after Easter, when she

comes up. She wants a full-length and your very best, your most splendid work."

Nick stared, not caring that he had blushed. "Is she serious?"

"Ah Nick — serious!" Biddy reasoned tenderly. She came nearer again and he thought her again about to weep. He took her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes.

"It's all right if she knows *I* am. But why does n't she come like any one else? I don't refuse people!"

"Nick, dearest Nick!" she went on, her eyes conscious and pleading. He looked into them intently — as well as she could he play at sounding — and for a moment, between these young persons, the air was lighted by the glimmer of mutual searchings and suppressed confessions. Nick read deep and then, suddenly releasing his sister, turned away. She did n't see his face in that movement, but an observer to whom it had been presented might have fancied it denoted a foreboding that was not exactly a dread, yet was not exclusively a joy.

The first thing he made out in the room, when he could distinguish, was Gabriel Nash's portrait, which suddenly filled him with an unreasoning rancour. He seized it and turned it about, jammed it back into its corner with its face against the wall. This small diversion might have served to carry off the embarrassment with which he had finally averted himself from Biddy. The embarrassment, however, was all his own; none of it was reflected in the way she resumed, after a silence in which she had followed his disposal of the picture:

"If she's so eager to come here — for it's here she wants to sit, not in Great Stanhope Street, never! — how can she prove better that she does n't care a bit if she meets Miss Rooth?"

"She won't meet Miss Rooth," Nick replied rather dryly.

"Oh I'm sorry!" said Biddy. She was as frank as if she had achieved a virtual victory, and seemed to regret the loss of a chance for Julia to show an equal mildness. Her tone made her brother laugh, but she went on with confidence: "She thought it was Mr. Nash who made Miss Rooth come."

"So he did, by the way," said Nick.

"Well then, was n't that making trouble?"

"I thought you admitted there was no harm in her being here."

"Yes, but *he* hoped there'd be."

"Poor Nash's hopes!" Nick laughed. "My dear child, it would take a cleverer head than you or me, or even Julia, who must have invented that wise theory, to say what they were. However, let us agree that even if they were perfectly fiendish my good sense has been a match for them."

"Oh Nick, that's delightful!" chanted Biddy. Then she added: "Do you mean she does n't come any more?"

"The dishevelled actress? She has n't been near me for months."

"But she's in London — she's always acting? I've been away so much I've scarcely observed," Biddy explained with a slight change of note.

"The same silly part, poor creature, for nearly a

year. It appears that that's 'success' — in her profession. I saw her in the character several times last summer, but have n't set foot in her theatre since."

Biddy took this in; then she suggested: "Peter would n't have liked that."

"Oh Peter's likes — !" Nick at his easel, beginning to work, conveniently sighed.

"I mean her acting the same part for a year."

"I'm sure I don't know; he has never written me a word."

"Nor me either," Biddy returned.

There was another short silence, during which Nick brushed at a panel. It ended in his presently saying: "There's one thing certainly Peter *would* like — that is simply to be here to-night. It's a great night — another great night — for the abandoned one. She's to act Juliet for the first time."

"Ah how I should like to see her!" the girl cried.

Nick glanced at her; she sat watching him. "She has sent me a stall; I wish she had sent me two. I should have been delighted to take you."

"Don't you think you could get another?" Biddy quavered.

"They must be in tremendous demand. But who knows after all?" Nick added, at the same moment looking round. "Here's a chance — here's quite an extraordinary chance!"

His servant had opened the door and was ushering in a lady whose identity was indeed justly reflected in those words. "Miss Rooth!" the man announced; but he was caught up by a gentleman who came next and who exclaimed, laughing and with a gesture

gracefully corrective: "No, no — no longer Miss Rooth!"

Miriam entered the place with her charming familiar grandeur — entered very much as she might have appeared, as she appeared every night, early in her first act, at the back of the stage, by the immemorial middle door. She might exactly now have been presenting herself to the house, taking easy possession, repeating old movements, looking from one to the other of the actors before the footlights. The rich "Good-morning" she threw into the air, holding out her right hand to Biddy and then giving her left to Nick — as she might have given it to her own brother — had nothing to tell of intervals or alienations. She struck Biddy as still more terrible in her splendid practice than when she had seen her before — the practice and the splendour had now something almost royal. The girl had had occasion to make her curtsey to majesties and highnesses, but the flutter those effigies produced was nothing to the way in which at the approach of this young lady the agitated air seemed to recognise something supreme. So the deep mild eyes she bent on Biddy were not soothing, though for that matter evidently intended to soothe. Biddy wondered Nick could have got so used to her — he joked at her as she loomed — and later in the day, still under the great impression of this incident, she even wondered that Peter could have felt an impunity. It was true that Peter apparently did n't quite feel one.

"You never came — you never came," Miriam said to her kindly and sadly; and Biddy, recognising

the allusion, the invitation to visit the actress at home, had to explain how much she had been absent from London and then even that her brother had n't proposed to take her.

"Very true — he has n't come himself. What's he doing now?" asked Miss Rooth, standing near her young friend but looking at Nick, who had immediately engaged in conversation with his other visitor, a gentleman whose face came back to the girl. She had seen this gentleman on the stage with the great performer — that was it, the night Peter took her to the theatre with Florry Tressilian. Oh that Nick would only do something of that sort now! This desire, quickened by the presence of the strange expressive woman, by the way she scattered sweet syllables as if she were touching the piano-keys, combined with other things to make our young lady's head swim — other things too mingled to name, admiration and fear and dim divination and purposeless pride and curiosity and resistance, the impulse to go away and the determination to (as she would have liked fondly to fancy it) "hold her ground." The actress courted her with a wondrous voice — what was the matter with the actress and what did she want? — and Biddy tried in return to give an idea of what Nick was doing. Not succeeding very well she was about to appeal to her brother, but Miriam stopped her with the remark that it did n't signify; besides Dashwood was telling Nick something — something they wanted him to know. "We're in a great excitement — he has taken a theatre," Miriam added.

"Taken a theatre?" Biddy was vague.

"We're going to set up for ourselves. He's going to do for me altogether. It has all been arranged only within a day or two. It remains to be seen how it will answer," Miriam smiled. Biddy murmured some friendly hope, and the shining presence went on: "Do you know why I've broken in here to-day after a long absence — interrupting your poor brother so basely, taking up his precious time? It's because I'm so nervous."

"About your first night?" Biddy risked.

"Do you know about that — are you coming?" Miriam had caught at it.

"No, I'm not coming — I have n't a place."

"Will you come if I send you one?"

"Oh but really it's too beautiful of you!" breathed the girl.

"You shall have a box; your brother shall bring you. They can't squeeze in a pin, I'm told; but I've kept a box, I'll manage it. Only if I do, you know, mind you positively come!" She sounded it as the highest of favours, resting her hand on Biddy's.

"Don't be afraid. And may I bring a friend — the friend with whom I'm staying?"

Miriam now just gloomed. "Do you mean Mrs. Dallow?"

"No, no — Miss Tressilian. She puts me up, she has got a flat. Did you ever see a flat?" asked Biddy expansively. "My cousin's not in London." Miriam replied that she might bring whom she liked and Biddy broke out to her brother: "Fancy what kindness, Nick: we're to have a box to-night and you're to take me!"

Nick turned to her a face of levity which struck her even at the time as too cynically free, but which she understood when the finer sense of it subsequently recurred to her. Mr. Dashwood interposed with the remark that it was all very well to talk about boxes, but that he did n't see how at that time of day the miracle was to be worked.

"You have n't kept one as I told you?" Miriam demanded.

"As you told me, my dear? Tell the lamb to keep its tenderest mutton from the wolves!"

"You shall have one: we'll arrange it," Miriam went on to Biddy.

"Let me qualify that statement a little, Miss Dormer," said Basil Dashwood. "We'll arrange it if it's humanly possible."

"We'll arrange it even if it's inhumanly *im*possible — that's just the point," Miriam declared to the girl. "Don't talk about trouble — what's he meant for but to take it? *Cela s'annonce bien*, you see," she continued to Nick: "does n't it look as if we should pull beautifully together?" And as he answered that he heartily congratulated her — he was immensely interested in what he had been told — she exclaimed after resting her eyes on him a moment: "What will you have? It seemed simpler! It was clear there had to be some one." She explained further to Nick what had led her to come in at that moment, while Dashwood approached Biddy with a civil assurance that they would see, they would leave no stone unturned, though he would not have taken upon himself to promise.

Miriam reminded Nick of the blessing he had been to her nearly a year before, on her other first night, when she was all impatient and on edge; how he had let her come and sit there for hours — helped her to possess her soul till the evening and to keep out of harm's way. The case was the same at present, with the aggravation indeed that he would understand — Dashwood's nerves as well as her own: Dashwood's were a great deal worse than hers. Everything was ready for Juliet; they had been rehearsing for five months — it had kept her from going mad from the treadmill of the other piece — and he, Nick, had occurred to her again, in the last intolerable hours, as the friend in need, the salutary stopgap, no matter how much she worried him. She should n't be turned out? Biddy broke away from Basil Dashwood: she must go, she must hurry off to Miss Tressilian with her news. Florry might make some other stupid engagement for the evening: she must be warned in time. The girl took a flushed excited leave after having received a renewal of Miriam's pledge and even heard her say to Nick that he must now give back the seat already sent him — they should be sure to have another use for it.

LI

THAT night at the theatre and in the box — the miracle had been wrought, the treasure found — Nick Dormer pointed out to his two companions the stall he had relinquished, which was close in front; noting how oddly it remained during the whole of the first act vacant. The house was beyond everything, the actress beyond any one; though to describe again so famous an occasion — it has been described repeatedly by other reporters — is not in the compass of the closing words of a history already too sustained. It is enough to say that these great hours marked an era in contemporary art and that for those who had a spectator's share in them the words "revelation," "incarnation," "acclamation," "demonstration," "ovation" — to name only a few, and all accompanied by the word "extraordinary" — acquired a new force. Miriam's Juliet was an exquisite image of young passion and young despair, expressed in the truest divinest music that had ever poured from tragic lips. The great childish audience, gaping at her points, expanded there before her like a lap to catch flowers.

During the first interval our three friends in the box had plenty to talk about, and they were so occupied with it that for some time they failed to observe a gentleman who had at last come into the empty stall near the front. This discovery was presently formulated by Miss Tressilian in the cheerful ex-

clamation: "Only fancy — there's Mr. Sherringham!" This of course immediately became a high wonder — a wonder for Nick and Biddy, who had not heard of his return; and the prodigy was quickened by the fact that he gave no sign of looking for them or even at them. Having taken possession of his place he sat very still in it, staring straight before him at the curtain. His abrupt reappearance held the seeds of anxiety both for Biddy and for Nick, so that it was mainly Miss Tressilian who had freedom of mind to throw off the theory that he had come back that very hour — had arrived from a long journey. Could n't they see how strange he was and how brown, how burnt and how red, how tired and how worn? They all inspected him, though Biddy declined Miss Tressilian's glass; but he was evidently indifferent to notice and finally Biddy, leaning back in her chair, dropped the fantastic words:

"He has come home to marry Juliet!"

Nick glanced at her and then replied: "What a disaster — to make such a journey as that and to be late for the fair!"

"Late for the fair?"

"Why she's married — these three days. They did it very quietly; Miriam says because her mother hated it and hopes it won't be much known! All the same she's Basil Dashwood's wedded wife — he has come in just in time to take the receipts for Juliet. It's a good thing, no doubt, for there are at least two fortunes to be made out of her, and he'll give up the stage." Nick explained to Miss Tressilian, who had enquired, that the gentleman in question was the

actor who was playing Mercutio, and he asked Biddy if she had n't known that this was what they were telling him in Rosedale Road that morning. She replied that she had understood nothing but that she was to be where she was, and she sank considerably behind the drapery of the box. From this cover she was able to launch, creditably enough, the exclamation:

"Poor, poor Peter!"

Nick got up and stood looking at poor, poor Peter. "He ought to come round and speak to us, but if he does n't see us I suppose he does n't." He quitted the box as to go to the restored exile, and I may add that as soon as he had done so Florence Tressilian bounded over to the dusk in which Biddy had nestled. What passed immediately between these young ladies need n't concern us: it is sufficient to mention that two minutes later Miss Tressilian broke out:

"Look at him, dearest; he's turning his head this way!"

"Thank you, I don't care to watch his turns," said Biddy; and she doubtless demeaned herself in the high spirit of these words. It nevertheless happened that directly afterwards she had certain knowledge of his having glanced at his watch as if to judge how soon the curtain would rise again, as well as of his having then jumped up and passed quickly out of his place. The curtain had risen again without his reappearing and without Nick's returning. Indeed by the time Nick slipped in a good deal of the third act was over; and even then, even when the curtain descended, Peter had not come back. Nick sat down

in silence to watch the stage, to which the breathless attention of his companions seemed attached, though Biddy after a moment threw round at him a single quick look. At the end of the act they were all occupied with the recalls, the applause and the responsive loveliness of Juliet as she was led out — Mercutio had to give her up to Romeo — and even for a few minutes after the deafening roar had subsided nothing was said among the three. At last Nick began:

"It's quite true he has just arrived; he's in Great Stanhope Street. They've given him several weeks, to make up for the uncomfortable way they bundled him off — to get there in time for some special business that had suddenly to be gone into — when he first went out: he tells me they even then promised that. He got into Southampton only a few hours ago, rushed up by the first train he could catch and came off here without any dinner."

"Fancy!" said Miss Tressilian; while Biddy more generally asked if Peter might be in good health and appeared to have been happy. Nick replied that he described his post as beastly but did n't seem to have suffered from it. He was to be in England probably a month, he was awfully brown, he sent his love to Biddy. Miss Tressilian looked at his empty stall and was of the opinion that it would be more to the point if he were to come in to see her.

"Oh he'll turn up; we had a goodish talk in the lobby where he met me. I think he went out somewhere."

"How odd to come so many thousand miles for this and then not to stay!" Biddy fluted.

"Did he come on purpose for this?" Miss Tressilian asked.

"Perhaps he's gone out to get his dinner!" joked Biddy.

Her friend suggested that he might be behind the scenes, but Nick cast doubts; whereupon Biddy asked if he himself were not going round. At this moment the curtain rose; Nick said he would go in the next interval. As soon as it came he quitted the box, remaining absent while it lasted.

All this time, in the house, there was no sign of Peter. Nick reappeared only as the fourth act was beginning and uttered no word to his companions till it was over. Then, after a further delay produced by renewed vociferous proofs of the personal victory won, he depicted his visit to the stage and the wonderful sight of Miriam on the field of battle. Miss Tressilian enquired if he had found Mr. Sherringham with her; to which he replied that, save across the footlights, she had not been in touch with him. At this a soft exclamation broke from Biddy. "Poor Peter! Where is he then?"

Nick seemed to falter. "He's walking the streets."

"Walking the streets?"

"I don't know — I give it up!" our young man replied; and his tone, for some minutes, reduced his companions to silence. But a little later Biddy said:

"Was it for him this morning she wanted that place — when she asked you to give yours back?"

"For him exactly. It's very odd she had just managed to keep it — for all the good use he makes of it! She told me just now that she heard from him,

at his post, a short time ago, to the effect that he had seen in a newspaper a statement she was going to do Juliet and that he firmly intended, though the ways and means were not clear to him — his leave of absence had n't yet come out and he could n't be sure when it would come — to be present on her first night: whereby she must do him the service to provide him a place. She thought this a speech rather in the air, so that in the midst of all her cares she took no particular pains about the matter. She had an idea she had really done with him for a long time. But this afternoon what does he do but telegraph to her from Southampton that he keeps his appointment and counts on her for a stall? Unless she had got back mine she would n't have been able to help him. When she was in Rosedale Road this morning she had n't received his telegram; but his promise, his threat, whatever it was, came back to her: she had a vague foreboding and thought that on the chance she had better hold something ready. When she got home she found his telegram, and she told me he was the first person she saw in the house, through her fright, when she came on in the second act. It appears she was terrified this time, and it lasted half through the play."

"She must be rather annoyed at his having gone away," Miss Tressilian observed.

"Annoyed? I'm not so sure!" laughed Nick.

"Ah here he comes back!" cried Biddy, behind her fan, while the absentee edged into his seat in time for the fifth act. He stood there a moment, first looking round the theatre; then he turned his

eyes to the box occupied by his relatives, smiling and waving his hand.

"After that he'll surely come and see you," said Miss Tressilian.

"We shall see him as we go out," Biddy returned: "he must lose no more time."

Nick looked at him with a glass, then exclaiming: "Well, I'm glad he has pulled himself together!"

"Why what's the matter with him — if he was n't disappointed of his seat?" Miss Tressilian demanded.

"The matter with him is that a couple of hours ago he had a great shock."

"A great shock?"

"I may as well mention it at last," Nick went on. "I had to say something to him in the lobby there when we met — something I was pretty sure he could n't like. I let him have it full in the face — it seemed to me better and wiser. I let him know that Juliet's married."

"Did n't he know it?" asked Biddy, who, with her face raised, had listened in deep stillness to every word that fell from her brother.

"How should he have known it? It has only just taken place, and they've been so clever, for reasons of their own — those people move among a lot of considerations that are absolutely foreign to us — about keeping it out of the papers. They put in a lot of lies and they leave out the real things."

"You don't mean to say Mr. Sherringham wanted to *marry* her!" Miss Tressilian gasped.

"Don't ask me what he wanted — I dare say we shall never know. One thing's very certain — that

he did n't like my news, dear old Peter, and that I shan't soon forget the look in his face as he turned away from me and slipped out into the street. He was too much upset — he could n't trust himself to come back; he had to walk about — he tried to walk it off."

"Let us hope then he *has* walked it off!"

"Ah poor fellow — he could n't hold out to the end; he has had to come back and look at her once more. He knows she'll be sublime in these last scenes."

"Is he so much in love with her as that? What difference does it make for an actress if she *is* mar — ?" But in this rash enquiry Miss Tressilian suddenly checked herself.

"We shall probably never know how much he has been in love with her, nor what difference it makes. We shall never know exactly what he came back for, nor why he could n't stand it out there any longer without relief, nor why he scrambled down here all but straight from the station, nor why after all, for the last two hours, he has been roaming the streets. And it does n't matter, for it's none of our business. But I'm sorry for him — she *is* going to be sublime," Nick added. The curtain was rising on the tragic climax of the play.

Miriam Rooth was sublime; yet it may be confided to the reader that during these supreme scenes Bridget Dormer directed her eyes less to the inspired actress than to a figure in the stalls who sat with his own gaze fastened to the stage. It may further be intimated that Peter Sherringham, though he saw

but a fragment of the performance, read clear, at the last, in the intense light of genius with which this fragment was charged, that even so after all he had been rewarded for his formidable journey. The great trouble of his infatuation subsided, leaving behind it something appreciably deep and pure. This pacification was far from taking place at once, but it was helped on, unexpectedly to him — it began to work at least — the very next night he saw the play, through the whole of which he then sat. He felt somehow recalled to the real by the very felicity of this experience, the supreme exhibition itself. He began to come back as from a far-off province of his history where miserable madness had reigned. He had been baffled, he had got his answer; it must last him — that was plain. He did n't fully accept it the first week or the second; but he accepted it sooner than he could have supposed had he known what it was to be when he paced at night, under the southern stars, the deck of the ship bearing him to England.

It had been, as we know, Miss Tressilian's view, and even Biddy's, that evening, that Peter Sherringham would join them as they left the theatre. This view, however, was not confirmed by the event, for our troubled gentleman vanished utterly — disappointingly crude behaviour on the part of a young diplomatist who had distinguished himself — before any one could put a hand on him. And he failed to make up for his crudity by coming to see any one the next day, or even the next. Indeed many days elapsed and very little would have been known about him had it not been that, in the country, Mrs. Dallow

knew. What Mrs. Dallow knew was eventually known to Biddy Dormer; and in this way it could be established in his favour that he had remained some extraordinarily small number of days in London, had almost directly gone over to Paris to see his old chief. He came back from Paris — Biddy learnt this not from Julia, but in a much more immediate way: she knew it by his pressing the little electric button at the door of Florence Tressilian's flat one day when the good Florence was out and she herself was at home. He made on this occasion a very long visit. The good Florence knew it not much later, you may be sure — and how he had got their address from Nick — and she took an extravagant pleasure in it. Mr. Sherringham had never been to see *her* — the like of her — in his life: therefore it was clear what had made him begin. When he had once begun he kept it up, and Miss Tressilian's pleasure grew.

Good as she was, she could remember without the slightest relenting what Nick Dormer had repeated to them at the theatre about the dreary side of Peter's present post. However, she was not bound to make a stand at this if persons more nearly concerned, Lady Agnes and the girl herself, did n't mind it. How little *they* minded it, and Grace and Julia Dallow and even Nick, was proved in the course of a meeting that took place at Harsh during the Easter holidays. The mistress of that seat had a small and intimate party to celebrate her brother's betrothal. The two ladies came over from Broadwood; even Nick, for two days, went back to his old hunting-ground, and Miss Tressilian relinquished for as long a time the

delights of her newly arranged flat. Peter Sherringham obtained an extension of leave, so that he might go back to his legation with a wife. Fortunately, as it turned out, Biddy's ordeal, in the more or less torrid zone, was not cruelly prolonged, for the pair have already received a superior appointment. It is Lady Agnes's proud opinion that her daughter is even now shaping their destiny. I say "even now," for these facts bring me very close to contemporary history. During those two days at Harsh Nick arranged with the former mistress of his fate the conditions, as they might be called, under which she should sit to him; and every one will remember in how recent an exhibition general attention was attracted, as the newspapers said in describing the private view, to the noble portrait of a lady which was the final outcome of that arrangement. Gabriel Nash had been at many a private view, but he was not at that one.

These matters are highly recent, however, as I say; so that in glancing about the little circle of the interests I have tried to evoke I am suddenly warned by a sharp sense of modernness. This renders it difficult to me, for instance, in taking leave of our wonderful Miriam, to do much more than allude to the general impression that her remarkable career is even yet only in its early prime. Basil Dashwood has got his theatre, and his wife — people know now she *is* his wife — has added three or four new parts to her repertory; but every one is agreed that both in public and in private she has a great deal more to show. This, is equally true of Nick Dormer, in regard to whom

I may finally say that his friend Nash's predictions about his reunion with Mrs. Dallow have not up to this time been justified. On the other hand, I must not omit to add, this lady has not, at the latest accounts, married Mr. Macgeorge. It is very true there has been a rumour that Mr. Macgeorge is worried about her — has even ceased at all fondly to believe in her.

THE END

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